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MISSING THE CURFEW: A CULTURAL HISTORY CASE FOR RE-READING
THOMAS GRAY'S MOST FAMOUS LINE

A Thesis Presented

by

Michael Thomas

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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ABSTRACT

Virtually all nineteenth and twentieth century accounts of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" find in the Curfew bell of the opening lines primarily a figure of death evoked by the growing darkness, the fading sounds, the emptying landscape and ultimate solitude of the speaker, and most of all the funerary associations of tolling bells and the "passing bell" tradition. And yet, culturally, despite some symbolic overlap, the Curfew bell and the passing bell are quite distinct, each with its own characteristic history, practices, traditions, and connotations, distinctions recognized widely in eighteenth century literary and antiquarian circles. In this thesis, I explore the literary historical question of why so many readers, popular and scholarly, of the "Elegy" have avoided the overt political implications of these Curfew traditions in favor of the more allusive funerary associations. I develop an argument grounded in both literary tradition and cultural history for taking Gray's famous Curfew seriously as a literal Curfew bell, rather than as merely a symbolic passing bell or funeral bell. The result is a view of the "Elegy" as engaging with *class* on a more fundamental level than usually assumed, both anticipating and informing the language of political economic discourse in the latter half of the eighteenth century, suggesting that whether we take the poem most fundamentally as a moral meditation on the ultimate universality of death or as a more socio-political reflection on the disparities of class depends greatly on how we hear this tolling bell.

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CHAPTER 1: MISSING THE CURFEW

Everyone must die, of course, but not everyone dies in the same way ... I don't know what comes after death, but what happens before it takes place in capitalist class society.

— Max Horkheimer, *Dawn: Notes 1926-1931 & 1950-1969*

From the very first stanza, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," published at midcentury in 1751, announces itself as concerned with liminality, with thresholds and transitions — the passage from day to night, from pasture to milking parlor or barn, from work to home:

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (ll. 1-4)¹

These opening transitions, unfolding in sequence as though at the signal of the bell, do much to prepare us for the further liminalities of time, of place, and of theme within the poem as a whole. The speaker, situated at nightfall within a graveyard between the church interior and the open countryside, drifts with the sound of the Curfew from the darkening day to muse upon the mortuary traces of the past in a quintessential moment of the lyric present; alone in the twilight, thoughts freed to wander, he moves between and explores the poem's grand contrapuntal motifs of life and death, of luxurious wealth and stifling yet honest poverty, of fame and unfulfilled potential. The ambiguity, movement, and tension imparted by these various contrasts and transitions echoing outward have contributed to the widely diverse receptions of the poem as, for example, an apolitical reflection on the timeless lessons of mortality; or a melancholy celebration of lyric

¹ In contrast with the standard edition of Lonsdale (1969), I retain the eighteenth century capitalization of "Curfew" for reasons that will become clear in my discussion below. See my Appendix for the complete poem and an account of our editorial differences.

solitude and sensibility; or a limited reform-minded lament for the poor; or a sympathetic but ultimately complacent apologetic for the English class system.² In each case, I will argue, how we weight and balance the speaker's themes — whether we take the poem most fundamentally as a moral meditation on the ultimate universality of death or as a more socio-political reflection on the disparities of class in what comes “before it” — depends greatly on what we hear in its first and most memorable line, how we hear this tolling bell, indeed whether we even hear the Curfew at all. For remarkably, while the “Elegy” famously begins — literally and thematically — with “The Curfew” tolled, few scholars have considered, let alone pursued, what this particular bell in its cultural and literary specificity might mean for our understanding of the ensuing poem, as opposed to bells in general or other more figurative bells. Instead, we have most often missed, if not actually evaded, the Curfew itself and with it perhaps the most fundamental note of the poem.

Virtually all nineteenth and twentieth century accounts of the “Elegy,” with some important exceptions, find in the opening lines primarily a figure of death evoked by the growing darkness, the fading sounds, the emptying landscape and ultimate solitude of the speaker, and most of all the funerary associations of tolling bells. The mournful trope, echoing Dante, of the Curfew or evening bell, of “chimes which seem to mourn the dying day,”³ resonates strongly here for many readers with the ancient British tradition of ringing the “passing bell,” or perhaps the “death knell,” to mark the loss or imminent

² I am thinking here in the first case of Cleanth Brooks, second of Anne Williams, third of F. W. Bateson or Raymond Williams, and finally of William Empson.

³ *Purgatorio* viii: 5-6. Translation from Lonsdale (117, note 1) with slight modification.

demise of someone in the local parish. As *A Compleat Collection of English Proverbs* (1737) instructs us: “When thou dost hear a toll or knell, / Then think upon thy passing bell” (230). In one case, from Wokingham, Berkshire in 1664, a village Curfew bell was instituted explicitly for this purpose of moral instruction, among others.⁴ Thanks to such pervasive customs, and to widely-read reflections on their meaning such as John Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) or the more folkloric *Antiquitates Vulgaris* of Henry Bourne (1725), it has come to seem that any “tolling of a bell had, by Gray’s time, accumulated almost inescapable associations with the passing bell” (Hutchings 496) and thus its *memento mori* thematics have come to dominate our modern understanding of the “Elegy”:

The essential note is struck in the first line, where day’s knell is tolled; *tolls*, *knell*, and *parting* — in a short line three words convey death’s mastery over the atmosphere of the poem. In these first stanzas there is no dramatic balancing of rich and poor, of obscure and famous, as there might have been if Gray intended to make social criticism his main theme. (Glazier 34)

Here, in a passage more explicit than most but nonetheless typical in aesthetic response, the powerful call of the “passing bell” would seem to drown out, to displace, the sound of the poet’s other more socially salient, if divisive, concerns in favor of a universal moral

⁴ From an endowment left to the parish for funding the nightly curfew “that all those whose care of being mindful of their latter end should incline them thereunto, might thereby take occasion, at the ringing of the evening bell, to think of their own passing bell” (Edwards 203); see also House of Commons, *Accounting and Papers* (18) for a more detailed account.

teaching that claims to supersede concrete inequalities — “mortality is the essential element of all men, the lowly *and* the great” (33). Other modern readers go even farther than Glazier’s “three words,” claiming to hear in the word “Curfew” itself a powerful intimation of our mortality, further reinforcing this “mastery” of death over the poem and thus emphasizing various melancholy moral and aesthetic themes as opposed to social critique.⁵ Henry Weinfield, one of the few critics to explore the role of the Curfew in any detail, represents a clear example of how that evening bell comes to be read as a monitory passing bell, subsuming the distinctions within Society to the elemental universality of Nature, once twilight is joined to an image of death at the graves of the villagers:

With the introduction of the Forefathers, these issues begin to take on more substance, for the thematic relationship between the Curfew and the passing bell that would be rung to toll the knell of a parting life is now clear. The Curfew would be rung by men, of course, but in a certain sense it is Nature that rings the changes, and at this point in the Elegy, everything appears to be subsumed by the great sleep of Nature. (50)

Even readings of a more overtly political bent, specially attentive to issues of class and rank within the text, are most often inflected by this solemn acquiescence to “the great sleep” of death called for by the passing bell traditions, finding there a model, if only implicit, of an aestheticized political complacency and disinterested social detachment: “The truism of the reflections in the church-yard, the universality and impersonality this gives to the style, claim as if by comparison that we ought to accept the injustice of

⁵ E.g. Williams (98) and Hutchings (496-497) claim that all the major words of the line “suggest death, including the “Curfew.”

society as we do the inevitability of death," remarks William Empson (4) in what certainly constitutes the most famous political assessment of the poem.

And yet, despite all such "inescapable" associations, a simple but often neglected textual fact remains — the bell in question is *not* a passing bell. Culturally, despite some symbolic overlap, the Curfew bell and the passing bell are quite distinct, each with its own characteristic history, practices, traditions, and connotations, distinctions recognized widely in eighteenth and early nineteenth century literary and antiquarian circles, but today largely forgotten or where remembered, rarely discussed at any length in the context of Gray's poem. While the passing bell expresses a religious call to prayer and recognition of our common mortality — practices "as ancient as having the bells themselves" (Bourne 1725:1) — the Curfew gives voice to a secular authority and worldly social obligation. From the Old French *cuevre-feu* or "cover fire," the term "curfew" refers broadly to a variety of laws dating to medieval times (and purportedly to the Norman Invasion) requiring households, at the sound of a church bell, to extinguish candles and "damp" or bank their hearth with ashes at a specified hour, ostensibly to prevent fire outbreaks. The banked fire would smolder, safely covered, ready to be stoked again in the morning. The essence of these longstanding traditions was captured succinctly in Gray's time by Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) in the first entry under *curfew*:

An evening-peal, by which [William] the conqueror willed, that every man should rake up his fire, and put out his light; so that in many places at this

day, where a bell is customarily rung towards bed time, it is said to ring *curfew*.⁶

Similar treatments of these traditions abound in popular magazines, regional and national histories, antiquarian publications, legal references, fiction, and poetry testifying to a continuing fascination with this bell across the long eighteenth century, when the Curfew still continued in many communities as an “evening bell” serving a wide range of regulatory functions long after such approaches to fire control were considered obsolete. Thomas Gray himself, however, remained famously terrified of fire since youth, a phobia re-confirmed in 1748 — while the “Elegy” was being composed — when his childhood home in London was destroyed, along with most of the neighborhood, by a midnight outbreak of fire from a neighboring house. In the following years, while installed at Cambridge where Curfew rang each night at nine, Gray prepared a makeshift fire-escape from his quarters and cautioned university members to “maintain a constant vigilance against the possibility of some ... collegian failing properly to extinguish their hearth fire before turning in one evening, and thus burning the entire college down about their heads,”⁷ precautions mocked by those around him. Even his later correspondence reveals a long-sustained anxiety over the personal and financial losses uncontrolled household fires could inflict. Such a fire-obsessed scholar, among the most well-read of his time in

⁶ The passage is actually quoted by Johnson from John Cowell (1607).

⁷The quotation is from *Thomas Gray: A Life* by Robert Mack (481). For an overview of the Cornhill Fire and its impact on Gray see pages 364-67; on his installation of a fire escape and the resulting mockery see 480-484. These events are treated to somewhat different effect by his two other modern biographers Ketton-Cremer (86-87, 137-138) and Lytton Sells (53-54, 79-80). The continuance of the Cambridge Curfew Bell is mentioned by Lonsdale (117, note 1).

literature and history, must surely have appreciated the literal meaning and cultural associations of the historical Curfew. Taken together, as we will see, this imagery of covering and uncovering flames, of fire simultaneously threatening and illuminating, added to the sense of the bell as a voice of political authority and the purported origin of that command with the tyranny of William and the Norman Conquest — not to mention the ambiguous emotional resonance of evening as a time of magical transformation — all made of the Curfew bell a powerfully evocative, multivalent cultural-political symbol and literary convention long before and after Gray, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Indeed, so salient and distinctive was the signal of the Curfew in the “Elegy” for eighteenth century readers that many found it difficult, or implausible, to hear the passing bell, if at all, as more than an undertone in the opening rather than the dominant motif, raising intriguing possibilities for rereading the poem today with greater attention to sociopolitical themes and issues previously drowned out by the passing bell metaphor.

Perhaps the earliest written review of the “Elegy”, in *The Inspector* of 1753, admits no such allusions to the passing bell tradition at all; though it does summarize the poem as “an evening’s meditation in the churchyard” while “walking over the graves” in an “obscure village,” these musings lead to no *memento mori* moments, no note of the passing bell. Instead, the meditations of the elegist are said to move *from* death *toward* society; here, the particular death of “humble villagers” calls to mind no parable of universal mortality, but an object lesson in the inequities of class and rank, themes I will argue are more in keeping with the history of Curfew:

From the recollection of what the peaceful inhabitants of the earth under his feet once were, and of what they might have been had opportunities offered, he proceeds to a just examination, and a consequent contempt of that pomp and splendor which distinguishes the Great. (2-3)

To be sure, several early editions of Gray's collected poems acknowledge the echoes of Dante's "chimes" and "dying day" in the opening line, and some early commentators such as Wakefield in his *Poems of Mr. Gray* (1786) remark on and approve the sounding of a passing bell in Gray's diction, finding "a particular and superior beauty in *Mr. Gray's — knell — the funeral sound of the departed day*" (168); others, such as one correspondent for *The Lady's Magazine* of London commenting in 1791 upon "Select Verses out of Gray's Elegy," insist more directly upon a symbolic reading of the literal Curfew: "The *curfew* was formerly a signal for retreat, but in this sense means a *passing bell*" (530), though generally the Curfew itself plays no direct part in these reflections and such readers highlighting the passing bell imagery in the eighteenth century tend to ignore the literal Curfew altogether. Conversely, George Wright in *his* annotations of the "Elegy" from 1785 features a brief explanation of the Curfew history (seemingly appropriated from Johnson) as his only interpretive gesture for the beginning stanza (45), with no indication of recognizing any passing bell connotations at all; in fact, he seems in the Preface to bemoan the relative lack of precisely such *memento mori* themes in a so-called "church yard" poem: "it is to be regretted so little appears throughout it, to inculcate and enforce those solemn, important, and interesting reflections, a walk among the *tombs* is peculiarly calculated to suggest, respecting *death* and a *future state*" (iii),

almost as though any acknowledgement of the Curfew reference were to preclude hearing the passing bell as well in the same stanza.

Some eighteenth century readers are more explicit in their sense that the Curfew reference is somehow incompatible with the passing bell reading. Another writer for *The Lady's Magazine* (1792), responding in a brief "Essay on Gray's Elegy" to the notion of the Curfew as a kind of passing bell insists, perhaps obtusely, that he "never took the term *curfew* to mean any thing but the evening bell" (36) giving as his reasons the unique history and etymology of the word which distinguish it from other bell traditions in common parlance: "It seems almost unnecessary to inform my reader who is conversant in the history of England, that the curfew was first instituted by William of Normandy soon after his reign commenced in England, as a signal for every man to put out his fire, for reasons which history of his reign fully shew" (36). As a result, he "cannot discover any figurative meaning" of death in the Curfew stanza, but only "a most beautiful, though literal description of the close of a calm serene evening" (37). Hugh Kelly, an earlier, perhaps more perceptive commentator in *The Babler* (1767), while recognizing the passing bell connotations of Gray's diction, nevertheless finds this "an unsuccessful attempt at metaphor, palpably repugnant to the rules of poetry and universal experience," his primary concern being that the Curfew, by marking the passage of twilight, of "parting" day, in progress, poorly corresponds with his understanding of the death bell as marking a *fait accompli*: "this bell is never rung till somebody is actually dead; ...

therefore, the term *parting* is consequently a false metaphor” (237).⁸ Much the same judgment is later passed on the metaphor by John Mitford (1836), the preeminent editor of Gray in the early nineteenth century. Arguing, first, that “the word ‘toll’ is not the appropriate verb,” he explains that the Curfew “was not a slow bell tolling for the dead,” thus not only contrasting the two bell-ringing practices but also dismissing precisely the one word most famously associated with the passing bell tradition — “Ask not for whom the bell tolls” (Donne). He then proceeds to systematically dismantle, word by word, the remaining diction connecting the curfew with twilight, death, and the passing bell itself:

The ‘glimmering landscape’ has long ceased to *fade* before the curfew.
‘The *parting day*’ is also incorrect; the day had long finished. But if the
word ‘curfew’ is taken simply for the ‘evening-bell,’ then also is the time
incorrect; and a *knell* is not tolled for the *parting*, but for the *parted*. (Cxi)

Overall, without drawing too fine a distinction between variant readings, such examples make clear that many of Gray’s readers in the first half century or so of his elegy, despite strong appreciation for the mortuary mood, found the relationship between the literal Curfew and the more figurative passing bell far more problematic than most modern interpretations acknowledge. Even the poet John Scott, for whom Gray’s “mention of a knell ... spreads solemnity over the mind, which prepares it for the sentiments that follow,” (189) expresses misgivings about the juxtaposition of these two bell traditions in his essay on the “Elegy”: “Parallels between different subjects are seldom natural or just enough to be pleasing; they exist oftener in the fancy of the person

⁸ Of course, understanding and practice of the passing bell tradition varies by community and region. See Scott (189-90) for response by a contemporary to this reader’s objection.

comparing, than in any actual resemblance of the things compared". Scott excuses the metaphoric construction somewhat reluctantly, but also damns it with faint praise in admitting only the slightest similarity between the two bells: "the supposed tolling of the curfew, just as the sun was leaving the horizon, is not wholly destitute of analogy to the tolling of what is called the passing bell" (189). The sharpest, and most illuminating, statement to this effect can already be found in the earliest sustained critical work on the "Elegy," published as an anonymous pamphlet in 1783, later attributed to John Young. Contrasting the curfew of the "Elegy" unfavorably with Milton's description of the curfew in *Il Penseroso* — "Over some wide-watered shore / Swinging slow with sullen roar" (ll 74-75) — which he finds to be an apt and "characteristical figuring" of an actual Curfew bell ringing, Young condemns the passing bell metaphor as impossibly strained:

To this characteristical figuring Gray has thought proper to substitute the conceit of Dante; according to which the curfew is made to toll requiems to the day newly deceased: a fancy more subtle than solid, and to which the judgement, if reconciled at all, is reconciled by effort. (15)

Although Young at times evinces a strong satirical bent, in imitation of Johnson,⁹ the extremity of his judgement here is entirely in keeping with the responses surveyed above and with eighteenth century attitudes more generally towards poetic metaphor.

Key to understanding these responses is Young's reference to the *conceit* of the evening bell.¹⁰ Both Young and Scott, in their respective judgements, draw upon the

⁹ The extent to which this essay by Young was intended as satire of Johnson versus criticism of Gray, or both simultaneously, is difficult to determine and was roundly discussed in the late eighteenth century by defenders and detractors of both writers (Macdonald 181-82).

general distaste in that era for the tendency of earlier Metaphysical Poets to structure their works around elaborate, often far-fetched metaphor or *conceit*, “which resulted from an attempt to domicile the Italian *concentto* in England” (Ruthven 1). Originally, in both the English and earlier Italian contexts, *conceit* or *concentto* signified “something like *concept*, *conception* or *idea*; but it was also applied to such diverse things as a completely unfounded supposition, a witty remark or idea, a clever act of deception, and the products of the artistic imagination” (1). In a brief discussion of the two terms as used in Renaissance England, Wolfgang Iser (1993) offers the following definition emphasizing the degree of dissimilarity figuratively bridged by *conceit*:

It is a stylistic device that was very popular in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry in Europe and particularly in England. It can best be described as a bold metaphor. The boldness or originality consists in the fact that "tenor" and "vehicle" appear to have nothing in common. (92)

With time, the “wit” reflected in such “far-fetched” metaphors (Praz 57) was deemed too intellectual and artificial for an authentic poetic spirit, such that “anybody writing 'seriously' towards the end of the seventeenth century was well advised to avoid conceits altogether” (Ruthven 53). Pope, in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), famously lambasts the confusion of mere “wit” with true poetic value:

¹⁰ The discussion of *conceit* which follows relies heavily on Ruthven, a valuably succinct history of the concept addressing much of its historical complexity. I also rely on the short, but stimulating analysis by Iser (91-99) of conceit in *Richard II*. For a brief overview of the Baroque *concentto*, see Minor (8-6), while Parker offers a more complex view of the intellectual history relating *concept* and *conceit* in Britain and the Continent. For an early eighteenth-century Italian understanding of *concentti*, see Vico’s *The Art of Rhetoric* (125-134).

Some to Conceit alone their Taste confine,
And glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line;
Pleas'd with a Work where nothing's just or fit;
One glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit; (ll 289-92)

Similarly, William Shenstone (1764) in light verse, with perhaps a wink at Gray from under “a churchyard yew ... at dusk of eve,” gently mocks “every fond conceit / of shepherd or of sage” (1: 216), but he also worries more seriously in these terms for the state of writing in his era: “What then remained for later writers but affectation, witticism, and conceit” (2: 171). Johnson, while accusing Pope of devaluing the “natural dignity” of wit in general, nevertheless agrees in describing the more metaphysical “wit” of *conceit* and *conchetto* pejoratively as “a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike”:

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (30)

Shenstone applies much the same judgement in his famous “Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening” criticizing any reliance on “abrupt transition” and “surprise” as a “symptom of bad taste, and a violent fondness for mere concetto” (2: 144), elsewhere declaring such conceit in all the arts a “false taste” (315), even a “counter-taste” based upon the most absurd and superficial of juxtapositions:

Such is the casual resemblance of Apollo, and the Nine Muses in a piece of agate; a dog expressed in feathers, or a woodcock in mohair. They serve

to give surprise. But a just fancy will no more esteem a picture, because it proves to be produced by shells, than a writer would prefer a pen because a person made it with his toes. (320)

Remarks such as these are the frame of reference for censure of the passing bell metaphor deemed “palpably repugnant,” an analogy “more subtle than solid,” a comparison inapt and only “reconciled by effort,” phrases which echo the idioms of eighteenth century aesthetics in disparaging *conceit* and *conchetto*: to treat of the Curfew bell and the passing bell in the same figure — two different bells “yoked by violence together” — would be, in this view, to construct a feather dog or mohair woodcock, against all expectations of literary and social decorum. My point here, however, in summarizing the theory of *conceit* assumed by sophisticated readers such as Scott and Young is not to evaluate the propriety of the metaphor itself, much less to share in their negative assessments, but to highlight such harsh criticism as marking the degree of disparity understood by these authors to stand between the two bells and their respective traditions. Nevertheless, where such early reviewers seek to blame the *poet* for a lapse of taste and a cultural misunderstanding in suggesting that the Curfew be understood as a passing bell, the fault may well lie more with ourselves as his readers, too eagerly hearkening to the echoes of death in the opening line and thereby exaggerating a more subtle symbolic resonance. In fact, as we have seen, Gray had every reason personally to recognize the uniqueness of the Curfew and its differences from the passing bell. More importantly, he was well aware of the unfashionable stylistic dangers posed by this *conceit*, and sought actively to avoid them; in a conversation with Rev. Norton Nicholls,

eleven years after the “Elegy” first appeared, he acknowledges, while also somewhat resisting, the echoes of Dante’s evening bell, saying “he had at first written ‘tolls the knell of *dying* day’ but changed it to *parting* to avoid the *conchetto*” (Nicholls 1297). In eighteenth century terms, by explicitly rejecting the symbolic apparatus of a *conchetto* or *conceit*, Gray rejects the notion of treating the line as merely an extended analogy between sunset and dying meant to govern the poem as an intellectual exposition, thereby transposing the supposed tonic note of death to one of many overtones. In this vein, rather than promote a straightforward identification of Curfew and passing bell as inferred by many readers, here Gray seeks to *diminish* the passing bell metaphor provoked by “dying,” replacing it with a more ambiguous reference to both “departure” and “division,” simultaneously shifting the theme one remove from death, one step closer to Curfew — to the extent that the Curfew bell, as we will see, traditionally represents a cultural and political division of night and day. This intentional semantic shift towards the Curfew, away from death, by means of “parting,” one of the most prominent, though not unproblematic, words typically cited as evoking the passing bell should prompt us to reconsider other hints that we, more than Gray, might have prioritized the theme of mortality over the Curfew in the first place.¹¹

After all, while the action of the poem begins with a *literal* Curfew bell, only the connotations of diction, hints confused and indiscriminate at best according to Mitford, recall the various funerary traditions; explicit reference to death does not appear until the

¹¹ Weinfield makes a similar point, but without reference to the Curfew: “what Gray wanted to avoid was not merely a conceit as such... but any explicit reference to the problem of death” (46).

fourth stanza with the appearance of “many a mouldering heap” in the graveyard, and even then elicits only reflection on “what happens before it,” the workaday lives of the peasants. No larger theme or lesson of mortality appears until the famous “paths of glory” five stanzas later, nearly one third through the poem, and even this can be read primarily as merely elaborating the earlier chastisement of aristocratic attitudes towards the poor. Moreover, the poem was not originally conceived as an elegy per se, but merely “Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard” as the original Eton Manuscript is titled;¹² in line with this, numerous scholars, even among those taking death as the central theme of the poem, have noted a lack of allusion to the elegiac tradition and marked divergences from the conventions of that genre.¹³ Nor did the final idea of an elegy come from Gray himself apparently, as William Mason has asserted in the notes to his *Poems of Mr. Gray* (1775):

I persuaded him first to call it an Elegy, because the subject authorized him so to do; and the alternate measure, in which it was written, seemed peculiarly fit for that species of composition. (106)

Gray came, perhaps, to regret this influence and subsequent thematic emphasis later, for the “Elegy” — appearing less than a decade after Blair’s *The Grave* and Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and a mere five years after Hervey’s *Meditations Among the Tombs* — was already destined to be read in the shadow of “graveyard poets.” The resulting tendency for his wider public to focus entirely on the subject of death, hearing presumably only the call of the passing bell in his Curfew, was apparently as frustrating to the poet as it was

¹² For images of the manuscript see Gray, “Eton College Manuscript.” For the transcribed text, see Weinfeld, Appendix B, (200-206).

¹³ See e.g. Eric Smith (51-52), Anne Williams (95-96), & Henry Weinfeld (119-120).

infelicitous to his critics, according to Dr. John Gregory in a letter of 1766 to James Beattie: “he told me, with a good deal of acrimony, [that the “Elegy”] owed its popularity entirely to the subject, and that the public would have received it as well if it had been written in prose” (Forbes 83). A similar conversation soon after publication of the poem is reported by William Mason:

I remember that, sitting with Mr. Gray in his college apartment, he expressed to me his surprise at the rapidity of its sale. I replied: “Sunt Lachrymae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.” He paused awhile, and taking his pen, wrote the line on the title of a printed copy of it lying on his table. “This,” said he, “shall be its future motto.” “Pity,” I cried, “that Dr. Young’s Night Thoughts have preoccupied it.” “So,” replied he, “indeed, it is.”¹⁴

Both of these oft cited exchanges on the poetic “subject” of death are usually taken as reflecting Gray’s disdain for the unlearned reader or his class-conscious eschewal of “popularity” in the commercial press; certainly his correspondence reveals an often acrid impatience with those, especially aristocrats, unable to follow classical allusion and documents his well-known panic upon discovering the poem was to appear in a merely popular magazine, but the dissatisfaction in the conversations above feels rather more specific, reflecting as much the particulars of *how* the “Elegy” was read, as his attitude towards popular publication in general. Similarly, the insinuation that his public could not differentiate poetry from prose might point to lack of appreciation for careful prosody,

¹⁴ The exchange is quoted by Lonsdale (113), but appears first in Mason’s “Memoirs of William Whitehead” (84).

but might also reflect vexation with something like the “heresy of paraphrase,” the assumption that his poem could be reduced to an extracted statement or general theme, already clichéd, like that of prose argumentation. Together, these dismissive remarks by Gray towards a faddish obsession with the literature of death and his reworking of the passing bell conceit of Dante in favor of the Curfew reinforce the idea that the poet conceived of the “Elegy” as something more than a graveyard meditation on mortality, something less straightforwardly expository and more complexly allusive, something more attuned to the distinctive Curfew bell which so prominently opens the poem and so markedly echoes the poet’s own life-long concern with the fire which constitutes one of its central cultural themes.

Such an emphasis on the Curfew as a unique cultural symbol would also be intriguingly consistent with an often unremarked quirk of capitalization in most editions of the poem authorized by Gray: the Curfew not only begins the “Elegy,” but also stands alone in the first three stanzas as the only capitalized word not beginning a line and virtually alone in the entire poem as one of only five concrete objects given this distinction, a tiny percentage of all concrete objects mentioned. Two others — “Ashes” and “Fires” — clearly extend the Curfew associations, while the remaining pair — “Tomb” and “Trophies” — conform to the passing bell thematics. Almost all the other thirty-three capitalized non-initial nouns represent generalizations and abstractions of person, place, or theme, e.g. the “Dead,” an anonymous “Swain,” “Heaven,” “Death,” and “Morn.” A few name specific individuals; most are personified human capacities or conditions such as “Luxury,” “Pride,” and “Penury.” While it would be unwise to rely too

heavily on the vagaries of mid-century capitalization for any thematic interpretation, especially in terms of personification, the publication history of the “Elegy” is highly suggestive in this respect.¹⁵ Early manuscripts, such as the Eton, show Gray capitalizing *all* nouns following an older, already somewhat old-fashioned style employed as well in the first authorized publication, printed by Dodsley (1751). This edition was prepared in extreme haste from manuscript to head off the embarrassment of independent publication without permission by the “undistinguished”¹⁶ *Magazine of Magazines*; later editions take a more targeted and intentional approach to capitalization. Dodsley himself, as an editor, was prone during this period to replace *all* non-initial capitals with lower case even for some personifications, as with the versions of Gray’s Odes appearing in Dodsley’s miscellany *Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (1748-58). In the case of publications specific to Gray, however, we are told that Dodsley was “invariably accommodating” (Wendorf 240) to the poet’s own specifications. In the painstakingly crafted *Designs by Mr. R. Bentley, for six poems by Mr. T. Gray* (1753) and the collected *Poems by Mr. Gray* (1768) the “Elegy” appears with neither the original style of universal capitalization nor Dodsley’s preferred elimination of such capitals, but rather with the mixed pattern of capitals described above. In these editions, Gray’s “own stylistic preferences are restored” (248) for the Odes, so we can only assume that this combination of fashionable lower case nouns together with selective retention of some specific capitals in the

¹⁵ Bronson and Wendorf provide overviews of trends toward reducing capitalization in eighteenth century England and their aesthetic ramifications. Sitter (157-164) and Lonsdale (xiii-xiv) provide cautionary notes on over-interpreting capitalization as personification during the same period.

¹⁶ The characterization is from Lonsdale (111).

“Elegy” reflects Gray’s own design as well.¹⁷ In contrast, the unauthorized magazine version (1751) capitalizes only names of people, animals, and plants, plus references to deity. These facts suggest, first, that the capitalization of “Curfew” is not merely convention or fashion, having been retained where others were not even in the face of a printer’s house style opposed to most capitals. Second, in preserving this specific capitalization Gray seems to find some commonality between his use of the Curfew and the various personifications and abstractions also still capitalized. This is not to argue that the Curfew has been personified (although the treatment of bells as symbolic persons with names, voices and even baptismal ceremonies was certainly long sanctioned in British tradition)¹⁸ but rather that the parallels heighten our sense of the Curfew as culturally symbolic. In this same light, Lonsdale’s decision to retain capitalization only for “drawing the reader’s attention to personification” (xiv) in the poem, while removing it from the Curfew, functions to de-emphasize any cultural symbolism of the bell. Much as the capitalized abstractions of “Pride” and “Luxury,” for example, evoke an air of allegorical interpretation as familiar gestures of earlier literary traditions, the capitalized “Curfew” — together with “Ashes” and “Fires” — invites us to read the word emphatically as naming not a generic bell to be ascribed figurative meanings only by

¹⁷ Additional background on the “house style” of Dodsley and his handling of the “Elegy” text is provided by Wendorf (246-248). For further detail on Gray’s exacting influence over the later Dodsley editions see Thomson, as well as Justin (91-103).

¹⁸ “With its reception into Christianity through baptism, with its possession of a name . . . with its ‘voice’ which spoke to heaven and earth in a distinctive tone known to the whole community . . . the bell was regarded as a half-divine being with a personality” (Price 127). For more detail on baptism and naming of bells in England see North (23-43), Tyack (45-62) and Raven (36-41).

context, but an established cultural icon in its own right alluding to, perhaps even allegorizing, a specific associated history of customs and beliefs.

Indeed, the extravagant language of conceit invoked by much of the early criticism against the passing bell reading stands as an index of powerful resistance among some readers to any reduction of the textual Curfew to a merely figurative passing bell, and the powerful persistence of the Curfew bell as a culturally specific symbol in tension with the passing bell trope. Time and again, many of the earliest literary readers of the “Elegy” while struggling variously with how to parse the opening line demonstrate not only an understanding of the cultural practices behind the Curfew, but also an expectation that these practices in some way be reflected accurately in the sense of the poem. And, perhaps unsurprisingly by now, there is much reason to suppose that Gray himself would have agreed with this assessment. In a remarkable passage from the poet’s correspondence that deserves much greater scholarly attention, Gray describes the problems facing any truly poetic translation of the “Elegy” in precisely these terms:

Every language has its idiom, not only of words and phrases, but of customs and manners, which cannot be represented in the tongue of another nation, especially of a nation so distant in time and place, without constraint and difficulty; of this sort in the present instance, are the curfew bell, the Gothic Church with its monuments, organs and the texts of Scripture, &c.¹⁹

¹⁹ The passage was originally quoted from manuscript in the biographical introduction to *Poetical Works of Christopher Anstey* (xv-xvi) and later reproduced by Toynbee and

From a poet most often identified as bookishly circumscribed within a strictly literary, and largely Classical, milieu — “painted from books and not from life”²⁰ — these lines addressed to Christopher Anstey, translator of the “Elegy” into Latin, are radically provocative. Here, Gray seems to be articulating a kind of historicist, even anthropological poetics in which the sociocultural practices—the “customs and manners”—structuring the context of language, as much as any textual traditions themselves, are strongly implicated in literary interpretation. The “Elegy,” he suggests, must be understood not only in relation to Petrarch, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, and the Graveyard Poets — to name only a few of the scholarly allusions typically identified for the opening lines — but also in relation to the more concrete referents of ritual, architecture, statuary, musical instruments, in short an entire assemblage of cultural material practices and conditions underpinning his images and symbols.²¹ Most striking of course in this regard is Gray’s citation in the letter, first and foremost, of the Curfew bell as exemplar of such a culturally specific “idiom” of practice, while the passing bell tradition (equally difficult, one would presume, to transpose into a Classical setting) remains unmentioned. If that which does not translate well — the cultural, semantic,

Whibley (2:748-749) with a conjectural note dating the letter to sometime in the autumn of 1767.

²⁰ The famous remark by Thomas Warton can be found in his commentary on *Comus* from his annotated collection of Milton’s *Poems Upon Several Occasions* (169).

²¹ In *A Dangerous Liberty: Translating Gray’s Elegy*, James Garrison, one of the only scholars to discuss these remarks (29), finds Gray’s argument on the limits of translation apt but not particularly original; nevertheless, he focuses entirely on the “nuances” of language itself, and not the extra-linguistic, material “idioms” of sociocultural context which to my mind mark the distinctiveness of the poet’s thought here, as well as its significance for our understanding of the “Elegy.”

stylistic specificity of a text, the materiality of the text inscribed as much in society as on paper²² — marks the most poetic dimensions of language, then by this account Gray would seem to place the distinctive sounding of the Curfew not only at the beginning, but at the very heart of his poem, understood now as to some extent or other implicated within a broadly sociocultural, not merely literary, history. This suggests, in turn, that the “Elegy,” however famously read and re-read, remains incompletely understood by many of its readers — both those early critics aesthetically unsettled by the supposed confusion of the Curfew with a passing bell and those who still today so readily embrace such a reading — if we hear in the bell *only* an attempt at metaphor, only a purely literary, purely textual device, and not also a more literal, more material, more contextual echo of actual historical practices, of actual bells and bell-ringers with all the complex, perhaps even more unsettling implications such a turn to history must bring.

²² “The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry” (Derrida 210). For a more sustained critical reflection on the social materiality of language as translation problem, see Niranjana.

CHAPTER 2: CURFEW TOLLS — THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF A TROPE

Of all the appliances with which civilization has furnished us, none is so interwoven with our joys and sorrows as the Bell ... to the man of culture and refined thought, the bell is an epitome of history, an embodiment of ideas wide as the poles asunder.

— Benjamin Lomax, *Bells and Bellringers*, 1879

An alertness to the distinctions between a Curfew bell and a passing bell among eighteenth century readers of Gray, irrespective of any specifically literary judgements this might provoke, would be entirely in keeping with the affinity of that era for the study of bells and bell traditions in general. To comprehend the Curfew of the “Elegy” we must comprehend not only the customary significance of that specific bell itself, but also the larger cultural purpose and import of public reflection, popular and scholarly, on those broader bell traditions at that time. The rise of antiquarianism, regional histories, and folklore studies across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marks an expanding interest in collecting and cataloging the diversity of cultural forms embodied in the artifacts, archives, customs, and traditions of specific locales for the purpose of clarifying and defining the national identity of Britain writ large:

Investigating the activities and writings of eighteenth-century antiquaries reveals a constant interaction between past and present, in which antiquarian knowledge informed the culture and identities of the modern world, and in which the intellectual agenda of a polite and commercial society dictated the directions to be taken by antiquarian research. (Sweet xiv)

In addition to the Roman coins, Anglo-Saxon barrow excavations, and harvest festival rituals so often associated with such cultural history investigations into the essence of

Britain, interest in bells, bell lore, and bell-ringing traditions was strong in these circles from the beginning, with the concomitant implication that such bells too must bear in some way upon the larger questions of British society and identity. Even foreign observers had long noted a unique fascination with bells among the English, finding there a definitive trait of the national character. The German lawyer Paul Hentzner, in his account of travels in England published during the early seventeenth century, remarks on the peculiar tastes of the English who are “vastly fond of great noises that fill the ear, such as the firing of cannon, drums, and the ringing of bells, so that it is common for a number of them, that have got a glass in their heads, to go up into some belfrey, and ring the bells for hours together for the sake of exercise” (64). Nearly a century later, French traveler Henri Misson makes a similar observation that for the English ringing bells represents “one of their great Delights, especially in the Country” (306), as does César de Saussure in his letters from England during the 1720s: “I do not suppose there is a country where bell-ringing is brought to such an art as it is here, where bells are always in chime and in harmony” (295). Comments such as these, with their appreciative insight into the popular pleasures of bell-ringing for the English, have been cited often and enthusiastically by later antiquarians and cultural historians as evidence that to understand Britain is to understand bells.

Amongst the English themselves, one of the earliest popular attempts to analyze local “rites and ceremonies” of the “common people” in depth, the *Antiquitates Vulgaris* of Henry Bourne (1725), showcases in the very first chapter a history of the “soul bell” (elsewhere known as the “passing bell”) and related bell-ringing practices as particularly

worthy of ethnographic attention. John Brand's widely read commentary (1777) on Bourne reemphasizes and expands upon this emblematic tradition, as does Henry Ellis even further in his 1841 revision of the same title. Across this period, frequent magazine articles and chapters in anthologies of "curiosities" and "amusements" explore the charms of English bells and bell customs; book-length histories of bells proliferated, as did guides to *campanalogia*,²³ — the art of bell-ringing — "one of the most popular forms of sport, ranking with hunting and cock-fighting, and far above cricket, football, or golf" (Walters 85) during the eighteenth century:

The country squire, the professional man, the tradesman in the town and the craftsman in the village, all found admirable exercise and amusement in bell ringing. Town after town at this period recast or added to its bells, with the object of rivalling or surpassing its neighbours. Ringing societies itinerated about the country, ringing peals in one another's belfries, and performing wonderful feats of precision and endurance. (85)

The nineteenth century, too, abounds with popular works on the cultural significance of bells — essays and entire books compiling local and regional histories, church documents, folklore, and personal narratives into grand overviews of what are invariably described as distinctively British traditions of bell-ringing and beliefs about bells.²⁴ Most

²³ E.g. The *Campanalogia Improved* of Monk, in its many editions across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as *Clavis Campanalogia* of Jones, Reeves, & Blakemore (1788) and *The Campanalogia* of Shipway (1816).

²⁴ See, for example, *The Bell: Its Origin, History, and Uses* (Gatty 1848), *Bells and Bellringers*, (Lomax 1879), *English Bells and Bell Lore* (North 1888), *Old Church Lore* (Andrews 1891), *A Book About Bells* (Tyack 1898). Similar British volumes continue

look back with nostalgia especially to the eighteenth century world of Gray as “the golden age of bell ringing” (Walters 84). England, we are told again and again across the centuries, has long been the “ringing isle,” the “Land of Bells”; bells are the “national instrument,” the “poetry of the steeple,” and the ubiquitous “voice of the nation”: “if all the bells in England should be rung together at a certain hour, I think there would be almost no place, but some bells would be heard there” (Latimer 526). Indeed, so essential are bells and bell-ringing to the national spirit, according to Thomas North in his *English Bells and Bell Lore* that “to write a detailed account of English Bells and of their connection with the passing events of life in this country since the Norman Conquest, would be to tell of much of the ecclesiastical, national, municipal, and parochial life of the nation” (1).

While many of these popular works refer primarily to the aesthetic, spiritual, and recreational attractions of bell-ringing, the historical importance of these activities for British life goes far deeper, as hinted at by the role of the bell ringers themselves: “The church ringers were an important customary group in the local community, legitimating certain secular activities, reinforcing adherence to the so-called state services, signalling local rites of passage and claiming, as their due, customary largess” (Bushaway 48-49). This elevated status of bell-ringer associations attests to the profound functional integration of bell-ringing and bell traditions within the socio-economic organization of village life. Bells were an essential element in the “vocabulary of celebration” (Cressy 67) linking the individual experience of social roles and life transitions with the general

well into the twentieth century: *The Bells of England* (Raven 1906), *Church Bells of England* (Walters 1912), and *Bells and Man* (Price 1983).

patterns of society at large in the form of public ritual at once distinctively local in tone and persistently national in the reiteration of similar practices from church tower to church tower across the land. Consider, for example, the image in Ben Jonson's paean "To the King on His Birthday" of first one bell tower pealing, then another, the sound spreading "swift as fire" from village to village, from shore to shore, sparking not only the "poetry" of bells but of cannon and drum as well in a celebratory commingling of sounds, each denoting a separate locale in the grand geo-political whole:

Speak it, thou Tower,
Unto the ships, and they from tier to tier,
Discharge it 'bout the island in an hour,
As loud as thunder, and as swift as fire.
Let Ireland meet it out at sea, half-way,
Repeating all Great Britain's joy and more,
Adding her own glad accents to this day,
Like Echo playing from the other shore.
What drums or trumpets, or great ordnance can,
The poetry of steeples, with the bells,
Three kingdoms' mirth, in light and aery man
Made lighter with the wine. (ll 1-12)

Whether strictly local, even familial, or in conjunction with other more regional proceedings, essentially every celebration or *rite de passage* of personal, municipal, or national importance from the birth of a village child to the crowning of a monarch would be marked by bells, but so too were the annual festivals, cycles of agricultural labor, and other regularized events essential to the local economy. In this sense, bell-ringing constituted a key symbolic practice helping to effect the articulation and coordination of political economic processes both locally and nationally since at least the early modern period as the calendar of events took on an increasingly complex religious and secular significance for the organization of society:

At the core lay the natural calendar, the cycle of the seasons that existed from time immemorial. Tied to this, or superimposed upon it, were the agrarian calendar of the harvest year, the Christian calendar of seasonally focused worship, the medieval scatter of saints' days, the law calendar, the civic calendar of mayoral years, and the developing repertory of regnal, political and religious anniversaries ... The calendar was a lesson in history and a reminder of duties, both secular and sacred. It was a convenience and a constraint, linking the lowliest subject and the highest powers, and providing a framework for the flowering of a national political culture. (Cressy 1)

If, as Benjamin Anderson has argued in *Imagined Communities*, the consolidation of a national consciousness required a concept of synchrony within a trans-local sense of time and space, in which local individual acts and relations could be understood as simultaneously national, then we should not be at all surprised that the calendar with its many political economic ramifications and by extension its central symbolic apparatus, the bell, should become strongly implicated with issues surrounding that emerging national identity, nor that bells would take on key symbolic functions in literary and political writing engaged with reflection upon those processes. Nothing made manifest in the concrete forms of everyday life these ideological relations more than bells; the ubiquity of bells throughout the land and throughout the year, their physical placement within the architecture of power, their inescapable sound, the substantial expenditure required for their maintenance and for their ringers, as well as the widespread literary and

cultural references to bell-ringing on important occasions all testify to “the centrality of the bells in the calendrical experience of town and village” (Cressey 70) and hence the centrality of bells in the public consciousness of self and society.

In the time of Gray, village life had inherited much of this same calendrical complexity harnessed to similar political economic processes. To the extent that most rural, and even many urbanizing communities still relied for their socio-economic organization upon shared expectations of reciprocal rights and responsibilities between, for example, landowner and tenant, or farmer and laborer, defined by custom (Bushaway 21-27), rituals reproducing such cultural norms — festivals providing for popular respite, redistributive feasts, labor parties — coordinated by the calendar and marked by bells remained essential aspects of everyday life:

The local customary calendar provided a frame of reference in which was expressed a perception of the social structure of the community, and also of its physical delineations. Customary rights and dues were claimed, sanction to the established hierarchy was given and maintenance of the physical form of the parish or manor as an entity was achieved.
(Bushaway 34)

Within this calendrical framework, many bell activities became sites and forms of political economic legitimation and negotiation. The necessity of bell-ringing and the skills required, for example, lent bell-ringing associations considerable leverage in extracting wages or other community benefits. In another widespread example, the right of the poor to glean from harvested fields was institutionalized in many areas through the

“gleaning bell” tradition; for the benefit of land owners, access of hungry impoverished gleaners to fields was regulated and controlled by signals from the village church bell, but at the same time as a highly conspicuous public marker of that entitlement the bell-ringing tradition also “played a significant role in the defence of this customary activity” (50-51) in service of those without land. On the other hand, bell-ringing in villages and towns could reflect communitarian principles in announcing the births, weddings, and funerals of rich and poor alike, while also reproducing class and status hierarchies in the different forms and degrees of bell ringing according to rank, or through upper-class expenditures to maintain annual commemorative bell ringing. In short, almost every significant ritualized aspect of political economic ideology and practice in eighteenth century Britain, whether rural or urban, found expression in, or in conjunction with, bells.

As the necessary functions and occasions of social, economic, and political intercourse during this period multiplied and complexified, not to mention the demand for increasingly precise measurement of time,²⁵ so too did the number of bells and bell traditions: “We should say, in reference to the bell, that the advancement of social life is more palpably indicated by the variety of uses to which this vehicle of sound has been extensively applied, than by any radical transformations in its shape or structure” (Gatty 2). So manifold were the causes and occasions of bell-ringing in many locales that some expressed annoyance over the seemingly interminable noise: “One of the principal Grievances of this City is the Bells, which are continually ringing either for Joy, Sorrow, or for the Amusement of a Parcel of idle Fellows” (Thicknesse 90). Others expressed

²⁵ On the cultural, literary, and psychological dimensions of these transformations see *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form*, by Stuart Sherman.

frustration over the frequency of payments to bell-ringers — “The number of occasions for which the ringing of the church bells was required by custom ... was seen as too numerous” (Bushaway 49-50) in some locales — or a more general concern that the proliferation of secular purposes for church bells tended to diminish their spiritual significance (e.g. Blunt). According to Thomas North,²⁶ any given eighteenth century community might utilize dozens of different bell signals; religious bell traditions alone, though greatly reduced following the Reformation,²⁷ could include the *Visitation Peal* honoring and celebrating visiting bishops; the *Induction Bell* announcing the investiture of new parish clerics; *Sacrament Bells* marking Communion, Baptism, and Confirmation; more intimate soundings related to marriage such as the *Banns Bell*, the *Wedding Bell*, and the *Bride’s Peal*; a host of mortuary traditions including the *Passing Bell*, the *Death Knell*, the *Funeral Knell* or *Burial Peal*, and the *Commemoration Ringing*, not to mention various calls to prayer still retained by the Anglican Church. Even the passing bell itself could be rung in “most extraordinary and unaccountable ways” to indicate age, gender, rank, and other personal attributes of the dying or deceased. Secular bells rung from the same tower but under somewhat different authority typically included the *Common Bell* summoning municipal authorities to session; the *Market Bell* regulating commercial transactions; the *Fire Bell* calling for aid in emergency; the *Parish Bell* signaling dispersals to the poor; the *Tempest Bell*, the *Gleaning Bell*, *Harvest Bell*, *Sowing Bell*,

²⁶ A short summary of the bell traditions described below is given in his introduction to *English Bells and Bell Lore* (1888), with each of these traditions and many more discussed in greater detail over chapters 9 through 16 (79-191).

²⁷ The persistence of bell ringing during and after the Reformation, despite much religious pressures against such “papist superstitions,” testifies to the pragmatic value of the bells and their intimate connection with local cultural norms.

Oven Bell, Pancake Bell, Holiday Bells such as the *May Day Peals*, and of course the *Curfew Bell*. The multitudinous names of these bells constitute a rich inventory of the cultural values and practices defining eighteenth century English life: “In these, and in many other ways, the sound of the Church Bells of England has been continuously heard, in the historic, and everyday life, of the nation. It is the voice of the nation, speaking through the sanctuary” (3). Overall then, to participate fully in public discourse meant that the populous learned to recognize, interpret, anticipate, and even manipulate the social, political, and economic significance and consequences of almost innumerable bells and bell signals.

This intimate knowledge and deep cultural awareness of bells and their implications in such great variety, though seemingly an esoteric study, constitutes the real historical context of the Curfew bell image in the “Elegy” — a world in which individuals, including Gray and his readers, are culturally predisposed to invest bells in general with socio-cultural, even political economic import, but also to associate specific bells with specific functions and varying forms of social control and politico-religious authority. In this light, we can understand Gray’s identification of a distinctive, untranslatable poetic “idiom” of particular “customs and practices” historically associated with the Curfew, and also reconcile the varying responses of readers as to the relative weight of the literal Curfew and the figurative passing bell in the opening line. While the passing bell and other funerary bell traditions were widely maintained during the eighteenth century, the “Curfew” bell — a name well known in some parts, forgotten in others, called simply the “evening bell” elsewhere — was no longer universally

practiced, nor even remembered in all communities. John Scott (190), for example, accused Gray of *anachronism* as well as *conceit* in placing the Curfew, which he supposed a long discontinued tradition, within a contemporary scene, when actually the Curfew bell was a daily event for Gray in Cambridge, a circumstance perfectly familiar to other readers: “The Curfew mentioned by our Poet was of course the great bell of St. Mary's, Cambridge; and the custom of ringing it at nine o'clock continues to this day” (Jacobus).²⁸ In fact, numerous essays and exchanges between magazine correspondents of the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries reveal broad variation in the degree to which an evening bell tradition identified as the Curfew was maintained across Britain. As a result, whereas the spiritual admonition to reflect on our own passing bell at the sound of tolling had attained an unproblematic, almost instinctive place in the English popular religious consciousness by the time of Gray, the historical traditions specific to the Curfew or *couvre feu* command to “cover fire” and remain indoors for the night were not always acknowledged nor understood, even by those familiar with a local bell called by that name.

Nevertheless, while the medieval use of the Curfew for fire control *had* long vanished, a comprehensive summary of Curfew practices presented to the British Archeological Association in 1849 by antiquarian Henry Syer Cuming reports that even as late as the mid-nineteenth century the Curfew bell was tolled nightly in a dozen London Wards and over half the counties of England (135-39). Moreover, most well-educated readers in the eighteenth century, and certainly scholars of an antiquarian and

²⁸ John Mitford re-asserts this identification in 1836 (xxviii).

historical bent were keenly aware of the *couvre feu* practice said to originate the Curfew bell: “Few points of national history have given rise to so much discussion as the facts and inferences connected with what is known as the curfew law” (Andrews 227). Thomas Carte’s *General History of England*, identified by William Lyon Phelps as the “standard *History of England* in Gray’s time” (137) takes great care to describe the Curfew while explaining the origins of English Common Law in the rule of William I, tracing the tradition to his oft-cited mandate “that all the common people should put out their fire and candle and go to bed at seven a clock, upon the ringing of a bell, called the *couvre feu bell*” (422). Similar prominent passages can be found in other important historical works of mid-century, such as *The History of England* (171) by Rapin De Thoyras, *The Chronicle of the Kings of England* (11) by Robert Dodlsey²⁹, and *The Life of Henry the Second* (Lyttelton 564). While there remain good reasons to question the complete accuracy of these accounts — questions, we will see, that would arise with great force later in the century — they certainly represent the scholarly understanding at the time of the “Elegy” composition and publication. To a great extent then, that many eighteenth century readers of the “Elegy” would insist upon differentiating the Curfew from the passing bell while others would not no doubt reflects variations in bell-ringing practices from community to community as well as different levels of access to historical study and degrees of familiarity with bell history and bell lore. Although most readers would be prepared to relate the bells of poetry in general to some broad sense of socio-cultural purpose, we would expect those with the greatest historical background —

²⁹ Under the pseudonym of Nathan Ben Saddi.

figures such as Gray with his passion for history and apparent interest in the Curfew traditions — to treat the Curfew of the “Elegy” with greater symbolic specificity and precision according to the intellectual context of the time, while those unfamiliar with the tradition, or more invested in a particularly religious mindset, to draw more heavily upon the spiritual commonplace of the passing bell tradition.

Much the same would be true with regard to the more esoteric knowledge of bells in specifically literary history, where the Curfew and the passing bell also have long, but largely independent careers in poetry. Chaucer, for example, uses the former as a simple evening bell indicating that the Miller’s beguiled carpenter fell hard asleep around “curfew-tyme, or litel moore” (3645). In the seventeenth century, Robert Herrick employs the passing bell in its literal sense to signal impending death in his “Litany to the Holy Spirit”:

When the passing bell doth toll,
And the furies in a shoal
Come to fright a parting soul,
Sweet Spirit, comfort me ! (21-24)

Thomas Heywood makes similar literal reference in *The Rape of Lucrece*, “Come, list and hark, / The bell doth toll / For some but new / Departing soul” (4.5.78-79). Shakespeare makes use of both bells, but to sharply distinctive purposes. On the one hand, the “surly sullen bell” of death appears literally in Sonnet 71 and somewhat more figuratively in “Venus and Adonis” — “And now his grief may be compared well / To one sore sick that hears the passing-bell” (701-702) — and similarly in *Henry IV, Part II* where the tongue of one bearing bad news is compared to “a sullen bell / Remember’d tolling a departing friend” (1.1.102-3). On the other hand, the Curfew appears as merely a

marker of time in *Romeo and Juliet* (4.4.3), and as an evening bell symbolically dividing the daylight world of humanity from the world of darkness in *The Tempest* (5.1.47-9) and *King Lear* (3.4.115-6). With almost every literary example, as with the actual bell-ringing practices, the functions and symbolism of the two bells remain distinct; rarely, if ever, are the two *equated* in poetry before certain late eighteenth century readings of the “Elegy.” I have identified only a single obscure case, in a 1657 sermon by Samuel Jacombe, where the Curfew command to sleep does service symbolizing death as a kind of passing bell:

Deaths penumbra his setting Sun 'ore cast,
While vapours rais'd did reasons twilight haste.
His tongue then rang his senses funeral,
Which was the Curfeu that to rest did call. (36)

Significantly, John Donne — the great popularizer in print of “for whom the bells tolls” and the passing bell trope — was particularly careful to distinguish, even contrast, the Curfew from the passing bell in his famous *Meditations*. For Donne, where the passing bell speaks to inescapable death and the possibility of eternal life, the Curfew indicates merely a secular, temporal safety from physical fire as opposed to the spiritual fire of death-bringing disease, sinful pleasures, and eventual hell: “It is not in man’s body, as it is in the city, that when the bell hath rung, to cover your fire, and rake up the embers, you may lie down and sleep without fear” (152). Certainly the covering of fire and a command to sleep could lend themselves easily to a metaphor of death, while the re-stoking of uncovered ashes to burn in the morning might readily suggest resurrection and life after death. And yet, such a use of the Curfew is also essentially absent from the poetic traditions eighteenth century readers would likely draw upon. Donne himself explicitly refuses such parallels, highlighting instead the socio-cultural differences

between the two bell traditions to make his specifically religious point. Similarly, we might well expect one versed in this literary history and the poetic conventions of bells, even without a clear understanding of historical bell-ringing practices, to likewise differentiate the Curfew from the passing bell and to approach the opening line of the “Elegy” with more than the symbolism of death in mind.

Far more common in literature than any association with the passage from life to death is a sense of the Curfew as regulating a quite different spiritual or supernatural boundary. According to Thomas Warton in his *History of English Poetry* (1781), the Curfew was long thought, by signaling the onset of nightfall, to release the various spirits and beings of darkness from bondage until morn:

Men believed, or were willing to believe, that spirits were yet hovering around, who brought with them airs from heaven, or blasts from hell, that the ghost was duely released from his prison of torment at the sound of the curfew, and that fairies imprinted mysterious circles on the turf by moonlight. (496)

This notion is reflected in *King Lear* when Edgar “madly” identifies the approaching Kent as the “foul fiend Flibbertigibbet”: “He begins at curfew and walks till the first cock” (3.4.115-6). We find it as well in *The Tempest* with Prospero’s reference to elves and spirits, those beings “whose pastime / is to make midnight mushrumps, that rejoice /to hear the solemn curfew” (5.1.47-9) and in Milton’s reference in *Comus* to a “stubborn unlaied ghost, / That breaks his magic chains at curfew time” (II). By the eighteenth century, this image of supernatural powers celebrating freedom at the sound of the

Curfew had become almost a literary cliché, as in a “Piscatory Eclogue” by Moses Brown in which the “fairy train are often seen, / to dance at Curfew o’er the moon-lov’d green” or a scene of ghostly visions triggered by the Curfew bell from *The Minstrel* of Beattie:

When the long-sounding curfew from afar
Loaded with loud lament the lonely gale,
...
There would he dream of graves, and corpses pale ;
And ghosts, that to the charnel-dungeon throng,
And drag a length of clanking chain, and wail. (18)

In each of these cases, the regulatory function of the Curfew over spiritual beings mimics the actual bell’s secular purpose of civil control, but transposed to the supernatural level and inverted to the perspective of those nighttime creatures who wake when humans sleep. This cosmic order, whereby day and night are divided and assigned, was even thought to possess a legalistic specificity and complexity not incomparable to the increasingly rationalized organization of human activities by bells, the daily schedule, and the annual calendar, as captured by George Steevens in his 1778 commentary on the Curfew of *The Tempest* and *Lear*:

It should be remembered, that, in the pneumatology of former ages, these particulars were settled with the most minute exactness, and the different kinds of visionary beings had different allotments of time suitable to the variety or consequence of their employments. During these spaces, they were at liberty to act, but were always obliged to leave off at a certain hour, that they might not interfere in that portion of night which belong’d to others. (Vol I 28)

Not merely a demarcation of *a priori* categories, this cosmic Curfew by dividing the continuum of twilight at an arbitrary but socially sanctioned signal makes concrete and definitive an abstract separation of “day” from “night,” of “human” versus “spiritual,” and thus reflects not so much the power of a given existential order as the power to institute and thereby govern that order. Elves and fairies then would dance “at” the Curfew not merely in celebration of release, but as a kind of participation in that liminal magic sounding from the spaces between the categories of existence. In this respect, it is notable that Prospero’s reference to the power of Curfew occurs during his speech of renunciation — addressing the spiritual forces that he has previously relied upon and controlled — and takes the form almost of a final incantation or summoning:

You elves . . . you demi-puppets . . . that rejoice
to hear the solemn curfew . . . by whose aid,
Weak masters though you be, I have bedimmed
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
And ’twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war (Act Scene 42-53).

Even in the act of relinquishing his magical powers, Prospero seems to draw upon for one last time this liminal force symbolized by Curfew, effecting his own transition from evil to good, from revengeful tyrant to tolerant counsellor, from authoritarian father to loving parent. The same sense of a magical incantation chanted at or with the Curfew appears slightly later (1627) in *Nymphidia* by Michael Drayton (161-168) when the titular fairy casts a spell explicitly invoking the supposed supernatural powers of the bell:

By the croaking of the frog;
By the howling of the dog;
By the crying of the hog
Against the storm arising;

By the evening curfeu-bell ;
By the doleful dying knell ;
O let this my direful spell,
Hob, hinder thy surprising. (165) ³⁰

This literary identification of the Curfew with magical control survives well into the eighteenth century in, for example, Warton's "Pleasures of Melancholy" (1747) when the speaker summons his melancholy muse at the evening hour and, apparently, at the sound of the bell:

O come then, Melancholy, queen of thought,
O come with saintly look and stedfast step,
From forth thy cave embower'd with mournful yew,
Where ever to the curfew's solemn sound
List'ning thou sit'st, and with thy cypress bind
Thy votary's hair, and seal him for thy son. (279-284)

Here, the ostensibly literal beliefs, or at least customary treatments, of fairies and magical bells of an earlier age have been replaced by a more obviously symbolic function facilitating the personification of inspiration and the invocation of poetic powers, but whether the supernatural properties of the Curfew were once taken seriously as suggested by Steevens and Beattie or represent a purely literary convention, an association of the Curfew bell at the time of Gray with the manifestation and legitimation of power and control over spiritual or creative forces remains clear.

³⁰ It is worth noting that while a "doleful dying knell" could possibly describe the fading echo of the Curfew, it more probably refers to the passing bell, as the anaphora of the lines clearly emphasizes each other invocation of "By the" with a distinct sound. In either case, the stanza clearly does not equate the two bells, literally or symbolically, but rather draws upon the passing bell, if at all, as a second invocation, highlighting their analogous roles as markers of boundaries while maintaining their functional differentiation.

Parallel to this poetic tradition of magical power, stands an equally common literary use of the *couvre feu* command as a symbol for socially sanctioned emotional repression and the demand for personal self-control. Where the actual Curfew signals for literal flames to be buried, numerous seventeenth century sermonizers, such as Matthew Mead in 1691, cite the Curfew when calling upon their congregations to imitate the bell and damp the flames of their passions: “a Bell was rung, and then every Family was obliged to put out their fire; and this was called the *Curfew Bell*. We have need of such a Monition every hour to cover the Fire of our Passions, least they kindle, and burn up all” (16). Others such as Jeremiah Burroughes in 1653 are more detailed in their historical allusion:

William the Conquerour in his first yeer commanded, that every night at eight a clock a Bell should be rung, and that all people should then put out their fire, which was called the *Curfew Bell*: it were well that some were admonished every night, to cover the fire of their passions. (204)

Cotton Mather employed a similar metaphor for controlling anger and dissension in 1702 when he praised a fellow clergyman who was “a great enemy to all contention, and would ring aloud *courfeu bell* wherever he saw the *fires* of animosity” (542). At other times, this admonition to control passion through the symbolism of a Curfew bell could take on a more humorous and sexually explicit form, as in *The Poor Scholar*, a 1662 comedy by Robert Neville:

A stinking breath is not a surer symptom
Of putred lungs, then an obscene tongue of an
Impure heart, 'twere better that clock (thy tongue)
Would never strike, except it were to better purpose,

Then to excite and raise thy lusts; 'twere more
Expedient that clapper should stand still, then
Eccho forth such sounds, which grate
All neighboring ears; I prithee let it rather (like the
Curfew Bell) warn thee to smother all the
Sparks of fiery lust (I, 3)

Similarly, an early eighteenth century novel, *Love Intrigues* (1713) by Jane Baker, figures the Curfew as covering the fires of a forbidden infatuation when the heroine, in order to hide romantic feelings of which her parents would not approve, does not correct their misapprehension of her pining for love of one man as mourning the death of another: “This their Fancy of my Affection for Mr. Brafort I did not much contradict, it being a proper Cur-feu to that Flame I had for Bosvil” (25). An identical construction appears as late as 1840 in the novel *Tylney Hall* by Thomas Hood where a daughter awaits with dread her father’s pronouncement that she must abandon an inappropriate romance: “The two minutes that elapsed before he spoke seemed a weary age; but at last came the toll of that curfew voice to command the extinction of the flame she cherished” (308-309). In both novels, as with the sermons, the Curfew allusion marks an attempt to interpolate the individual subject within the proper emotional constraints and moral expectations of the community at large. This more societal Curfew bell represents an idealized internalization of cultural norms demanded by external social authority, parental or priestly, just as the cosmic Curfew both expresses and symbolizes a supernatural power.

All of these literary Curfews, like much of the actual system of bell signals in eighteenth century Britain, contain at their core an essential element of cultural command — whether of spirits or self, of child or parishioner — to cover and hide, to set away, to control, to repress, which may simultaneously be resisted or defied, just as covered

flames may continue to burn out of sight until released at morning. And in this respect all harken back not only to the socio-political functions of British bells in general, but more specifically to historical accounts relating the original English Curfew to the imposition of William the Conqueror's rule upon the English and their subsequent efforts to overthrow this so-called Norman Yoke. In fact, the majority of mid-eighteenth century historians identify the Curfew not merely as a pragmatic means of controlling fire, but as a tyrannical effort to control popular discontent. Rapin De Thoyras (1743) describes the Curfew as one of several techniques by which William protected himself against "the secret Practices of his Subjects" and the threat of rebels or "secret enemies": "The First was to take away their arms. The second to forbid them any Lights in their Houses after eight a-clock. At which hour a Bell was rung to warn them to put out their Fire and Candle, under penalty of a great fine for every offence" (171). William Hutchinson (102) portrays the Curfew as intended specifically "to prevent associations and conspiracies," agreeing that the use of fire or candles would incur "severe penalties," a penalty described by Dodsley (1740) as "pain of Death" (11). The earliest example, and likely documentary source of these assessments in addition to popular tradition, can be found in the *Anglica Historia* of Polydore Vergil (1555) where William hopes "to deter all men from rebellion" with practices such as the Curfew:

Likewise, so that he might tame the people's ferocity, he disarmed everybody and passed an edict that every head of household should bank his fire and go to bed by about eight o'clock in the evening, and he enjoined that in every village a signal be given for this by church bells, a

custom which is observed even nowadays, and by the Normans was called *coverfeu*. (Book IX 2)

Such understandings of the bell, while largely accepted in Gray's time, were not entirely uncontroversial at mid-century; Pasquier, whose history of France became available in England in 1723, traces the Curfew to King Philip VI in 1331 rather than William, but maintains the association with control of political rebellion: "My opinion is that the insurrections and turmoil, and tumults gave rise to this policy" (406). Thomas Carte, though clearly acknowledging the theme of social control when giving the purpose of the bell as "to prevent the debauches, disorders, and other mischiefs frequently committed at night," rather softens the view of William as merely seeking "to secure the peace of the country" and "reconcile the English to his government" when he includes the Curfew in an innocuously phrased list of "measures to keep the English quiet" (422). Nevertheless, the association of the Curfew specifically with Norman tyranny over England, however dubious as historical fact, persisted in the eighteenth century political imagination and beyond. For many at the time of Gray, the Curfew was always "heard by the English as the knell of their departed liberty" (Hutchinson 102) and, at least in literature and history, conveyed far more emotional impact than the simple onset of evening and sleep:

The sound of this Bell, called the Curfew, was for a long while very grating in the ears of the English. When they reflected on the Sweets of Liberty, enjoyed under their antient Kings, they could not without extreme Grief behold themselves reduced to such slavery. If this Order was not

most punctually observed, they were sure to be immediately punished as guilty of some heinous Crime. This Bell therefore was as a Signal, which being repeated every day, constantly put them in mind of their Slavery. This Oppression joined to a thousand others which they daily suffered from the hands of the King, as well as from the Foreigners, imbittered their Lives and made them deplore their sad and helpless condition. (De Thoyras 171)

Echoes of this deep-seated political memory are obviously to be heard in the poetic Curfews of supernatural power or emotional repression, and go far in explaining why such themes of social control would sound more loudly and persistently in most literary appropriations of the Curfew than any supposed similarities with the passing bell. That the more overtly political history of the Curfew is never far from the literary bell can be heard clearly in Hood's *Tylney Hall* when a mere three sentences after the Curfew metaphor smothers the young woman's romantic dreams her father justifies his authority and demands her obedience in terms that invoke precisely the language of tyrannical power and despotic government traditionally identified with that bell:

If the sovereignty of a king be a divine right, and I see no reason to impugn the doctrine, how sacred must be the origin of a parent's jurisdiction, where the subject is indebted to the supreme head, not merely for liberty and protection, but for life itself, and the means whereby life is sustained. Domestic government indeed is, or ought necessarily to be, a pure despotism, seeing that there is no intermediate estate between the

parent and the child, the ruler and the ruled. His decrees, consequently, are arbitrary and absolute, exacting and requiring implicit acquiescence. (309)

Though apparently exaggerated for humorous intent, clearly the satirical impact of these lines assumes a cultural salience of the political associations they draw upon and mock.

Even more telling, however, are those eighteenth century poems which explicitly narrate a Curfew tale of repression under William the Conqueror. James Thomson, the most famous poet of Gray's youth and a powerful influence upon him, essentially retells in Book IV of *Liberty* (1736) the widely recirculating version of the Norman Curfew promoted by Polydore Virgil and his eighteenth century followers:

Instead of Edward's gentle equal Laws,
The furious Victor's partial Will prevail'd.
All prostrate lay; and, in the secret Shade,
Deep stung but fearful Indignation gnash'd
His Teeth. Of *Freedom*, *Property*, despoil'd,
And of their Bulwark, *Arms*; with *Castles* crush'd,
With *Ruffians* quarter'd o'er the *bridled* Land;
The shivering Wretches, at the *Curfew* Sound,
Dejected shrunk into their sordid Beds,
And, through the mournful Gloom, of ancient Times
Mused sad, or dreamt of Better. (748-58)

Here, Thomson underscores the oppressive sound of the bell — the very signal causing them to cower “dejected” — by placing it within the familiar context of other historical predations upon the English people such as the seizure of communal land, displacement of peasant farming, and closure of forests to gathering of wood and small game:

E'en to feed
A *Tyrant's* idle Sport the Peasant starv'd:
To the *wild* Herd, the Pasture of the *Tame*,
The cheerful Hamlet, spiry Town, was given,
And the brown Forest roughen'd wide around. (751-762)

Nevertheless, the Curfew itself retains the central symbolic emphasis as he continues the trope across several pages. First, when the eventual reassertion of Liberty against tyranny is pictured as a fire freshly uncovered and roused again: “But this so dead, so vile Submission, long / Endur’d not. Gathering Force, My gradual Flame / Shook off the Mountain of tyrannic Sway” (763-65). Then, again and again, when he speaks of “generous fire” (828), of “ardor quench’d” (861) and “Valour fir’d” (863), of a “returning Light” (903) that “burst in open Day” (905). Most significantly, in terms of possible influence on the “Elegy,” after “Hambden rais’d his Voice” (1013) — the identical rebellious figure cited by Gray in Stanza 15 — the subsequent Revolution takes form as an uncontrolled fire: “There a Flame / Broke out, that clear’d, consum’d, renew’d the Land” (1020-21). That such a vivid, sustained invocation of the historical Curfew legend and associated poetic imagery of fiery political conflict could appear in a major work by the most widely read poet of the day, merely a decade before Gray would begin his composition, *without* reflecting and at the same time informing the literary cultural context of the “Elegy” and its readers is difficult to imagine.

Moreover, the same overt allusion to political tyranny appears in William Shenstone’s “Elegy XV” written just a few years later, albeit to a less narrative, more figurative purpose, drawing attention again to the poetic powers of Curfew at the time of Gray. Written as a tribute “In Memory of a Private Family in Worcestershire” — the Penns of Harborough Estate, his maternal relatives — the piece opens with a passing bell marking the death of an unnamed Lord, but continues by comparing this loss, a loss of local gentry as well as a familial sorrow, to the loss of freedom in the Norman Conquest:

From a lone tower, with reverend ivy crown'd,
The pealing bell awaked a tender sigh;
Still, as the village caught the waving sound,
A swelling tear distream'd from every eye.

So droop'd, I ween, each Briton's breast of old,
When the dull curfew spoke their freedom fled;
For, sighing as the mournful accent roll'd,
"Our hope," they cried, "our kind support, is dead!" (1-8)

In these two stanzas, the political Curfew allusion, relying upon the widely understood and, in literary terms at least, still strongly felt cultural tragedy, offers an analogy by which to understand the depth of pain felt by the surviving family, friends, and community members at the sound of the passing bell. Much as the passages from Thomson seem to focus and condense a vast archive of historical Curfew references, the juxtaposition here of both bells explicitly within the same few lines serves effectively to summarize and highlight the culturally distinctive functions and associations of the two bells I have outlined above: where the passing bell *marks* an empirical event, the death of a local lord, the Curfew *creates* an event by dividing the continuum of twilight into a socially and politically significant boundary; the passing bell is constative, the Curfew performative, enacting what it purports to mark. The passing bell commemorates, the Curfew commands. The passing bell speaks to individual mortality, the Curfew bell speaks to the socio-economic relations of communal catastrophe; the passing bell invokes a metaphysics of loss, the Curfew a politics.

More striking still, for our purposes, is the remarkable similarity of this passage to the opening stanza in the "Elegy" of Gray: each writer begins a poem in elegiac mode by drawing a parallel, to some extent or other, between the Curfew and the passing bell.

Whether Shenstone was influenced by Gray, or vice versa, or whether both give voice to a certain poetic spirit of the times can easily be debated,³¹ but comparing the two poems, regardless of their textual priority, underscores much about the function of the Curfew in Gray's poem as it draws upon the cultural context we have now begun to understand: where Shenstone presents a literal passing bell supplemented by a figurative or analogical reference to Curfew, Gray's strategy represents the reverse, a literal Curfew modulated by figurative suggestions of the other. Where Shenstone begins with a signal marking or commemorating the brute material fact of death, then figuratively elevating this loss to a socio-political drama of heroic struggle on a national historical stage, Gray could be seen to begin *his* poem with the bell as *decree*, perhaps echoing those national historical struggles, and only then metaphorically tinging the implications of that command with the dark import of death. Culturally then, his Curfew bell would mark not a *fait accompli*, not a simple attestation to nightfall, let alone to death, but a performative act of invocation and social control — demarcating the cultural, spiritual, and political boundaries of village life on many levels — as though initiating, if not actually commanding the melancholy mood which begins to radiate throughout the scene.

³¹ Shenstone's twenty-six *Elegies* do not appear in print until 1764, thirteen years after the "Elegy," but apparently were composed much earlier, in the 1740s, and circulated in manuscript form. On the date of Elegy XV specifically and any possible influence on Gray, see Fisher. For the counterargument that Shenstone *revised* "Elegy XV" in imitation of Gray before publication, see Lonsdale (108-9).

CHAPTER 3: THE CURFEW AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION

*I used to hear it when a boy. It tells a tale of other times. The days that are past, the generations that are gone, the tangled forest glades and hamlets brown of my native country, the woodsman's art, the Norman warrior armed for the battle or in his festive hall, the conqueror's iron rule and peasant's lamp extinguished, all start up at the clamorous peal, and fill my mind with fear and wonder.*³²

—Anonymous reflections on the Curfew bell, 1827

If, as the weight of so much literary historical evidence suggests, the Curfew resonates in the world of mid-eighteenth century England with multiple themes of power, social control, repression, and even tyranny, the question remains as to why these themes have so rarely been heard in modern scholarly accounts of the “Elegy,” while the passing bell themes of mortality and solitude, which find little support in the Curfew tradition, echo so strongly. Symptomatically, scholarly editions of the “Elegy” from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries tend not to acknowledge any possible influence on the poem by mid-century historical accounts of the political Curfew, let alone by the use of those accounts in the poetry of Gray’s contemporaries such as Thomson and Shenstone. Of the eight major annotated versions of the “Elegy” appearing across those two centuries,³³ only one eighteenth century (Wright) and two late nineteenth century editions (Phelps and Tovey) even mention the supposed historical origin of the Curfew when remarking on the opening line and all three situate these political overtones firmly in the past; none suggest a possible thematic import to the poem itself. Not until Lonsdale (1969) does an annotated volume mention the Curfew in

³² From “On a Sundial.” *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* (355).

³³ Mason (1775), Wright (1785), Wakefield (1786), Mitford (1836), Gosse (1885), Bradshaw (1891), Phelps (1894), Tovey (1898).

Thomson; none cite Shenstone. This, despite the fact that the Curfew scene of Norman tyranny in Thomson was widely read and regularly quoted in popular antiquarian accounts of the Curfew during this same period.³⁴ The relative absence of such references stands out all the more given the near cottage industry in nineteenth century popular magazines of reader correspondence and other, more learned essays claiming to find new sources and allusions in Gray. In contrast, virtually all the editions mention Dante's apolitical evening bell (acknowledged by Gray himself); three mention, in passing, one or more appearances of the Curfew in Shakespeare, though without pursuing his thematics of supernatural control. Taken together, these tendencies suggest a deep-seated reluctance, if not anxiety, over the possibility of opening the "Elegy" Curfew to a more historicized reading, a suggestion that hints further at possible explanations for the more general avoidance of Curfew in favor of the passing bell tradition.

This suggestion takes on even greater force when we consider perhaps the most seriously cited antecedent for the "Elegy" line in the annotated editions, after Dante, and certainly the most discussed parallel in modern scholarship — *Il Penseroso* of Milton:

Oft on a Plat of rising ground,
I hear the far-off Curfeu sound,
Over som wide-water'd shoar,
Swinging slow with sullen roar; (73-6)

To be sure, scholarly interest in this passage is not without merit. *Il Penseroso* was an important touchstone in the widespread fascination of eighteenth century literary culture with the melancholy "man of sensibility" ethos that so impressed Gray and his peers.³⁵

³⁴ See, for example, the anonymous "The Curfew" (1835) or Cresswell (1895).

³⁵ Reed . *The Background of Gray's Elegy: A Study in the Taste for Melancholy Poetry*.

Many readers note the similarities to Milton's solitary thinker in Gray's "woeful wan" poet of the penultimate stanzas before the Epitaph, especially his woodland setting beside a stream, and a young Gray once expressly identified himself with that figure in a similar setting.³⁶ Nevertheless, other less familiar interpretations of those stanzas, pointing in quite different directions thematically, are equally plausible. As noted by Myrddin Jones, the "woeful wan" poet also strongly resembles the pensive Jacques in *As You Like It*, a parallel commonly recognized in the eighteenth century, and Gray himself was often identified with that character by contemporaries such as Mason.³⁷ Indeed, I would argue that the wooded site of the poet's meditation (lines 101-4) matches much more closely that of Jacques (2.1.35-37) in the play. Here again we find a sense that the historical ramifications of Curfew are being avoided in the most common analyses, for to read Gray's poet as *Il Penseroso* is to emphasize only an affirming meditation on "the joys of poetry, philosophy, and religion," while the scene of Jacques reflecting on political usurpation appears "emblematic in two ways, both as an image of social tyranny, and of the melancholy man" (Jones 41). Ultimately, however, it is not a matter of preferring one allusion over the other, but rather the persistent emphasis on *Il Penseroso* itself, and Dante, to the exclusion of other antecedents such as Thomson, that hints most strongly of critical bias. Tellingly, for example, in attempting to link the Curfew of Milton to the

³⁶ Letter to Walpole, 1736, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray* (Vol I 48), written while visiting relatives near Burnham Beeches, site of the solitary woodland walks which prompted his remark.

³⁷ On the similarities, see e.g. the annotated Shakespeare of Steevens (Vol III 290), the pseudonymous correspondence of Etonensis to the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1799), and the list of poetic parallels in Croft (222). Jones discusses the views of Mason, as does Lonsdale in passing (136 nt 102).

“Elegy,” Lonsdale speculates wildly that Gray, upon hearing the bell rung in Cambridge, “probably remembered ‘I hear the far off *Curfeu* sound’,” while the Thomson passage is relegated, unquoted, to an afterthought, where the Curfew “also occurs” (117 nt 17.1), without considering why Gray might not also have recalled Thomson in such moments or identifying the quite different tenor and import of those lines. Such a critical imagination seemingly already committed to preserving Gray, and the speaker of the “Elegy,” in an apolitical meditation on the bell would no doubt find greater consolation in *Il Penseroso* than in Thomson or other literary historical accounts.

Unlike Thomson or Shenstone, no Norman oppressors or other explicit links to a political past appear in the poem of Milton. Instead, like the Curfew of Dante, his bell functions primarily as an evening bell underscoring the isolation of the speaker at twilight. Sharing this twilight function with the beginning of the “Elegy,” it shares also with that poem an impression of sound opening liminal spaces: neither too near, nor too far, the physical distance of *Il Penseroso* from his community finds expression in the still audible, but diminished ringing from town, while his social liminality is suggested by the temporal transgression of lingering outside after hours, even as the Curfew bell calls the community to retire. Much the same can be said for the speaker of the “Elegy”; nevertheless, the Curfew of Milton — despite its “sullen roar” — has not the same sense of performative *power*. While recalling the tradition of supernatural summoning in such moments — “Thee Chauntress oft the woods among,/I woo to hear thy even-song” (63-4) — the Curfew of *Il Penseroso*, merely one of several such images in the middle of the poem, has not the singular prominence of the Curfew which introduces the “Elegy,”

making it more an *occasion* of reflection and less a power in its own right, more a feature internal to the overall psychic landscape than an apparent originator of the melancholy world as in Gray, where the powerful sense of thresholds and transitions pervading the “Elegy” scene owes much to the ringing of the Curfew. Seemingly initiated at the insistence of that bell, each transition in turn is marked by sound, each sound by a repetition of itself; the clangs of the clapper, the calls of the herd, the footsteps of the exhausted ploughman, each consists of individual sounds in series, an impression reinforced by the prominent repetition of sounds within each line, in “toll” and “knell,” in “low” and “slow,” in “plough” and “plods,” and in the “weary way.” The effect is of echo and reverberation, of sounds crisscrossing, interpenetrating, and radiating out through the village environs, or across the open fields and pastures, or down the country lanes that join them.

Thus, where the Curfew of Milton measures a distance, that of Gray occupies and fills spaces. Space and time become symphonic in the most literal, etymological sense. But the effect is also of prolonged diminuendo, of reverberation gradually diminished, as the sounds become liminal in that other sense of approaching the minimal threshold of perception. For the bell “tolls” but the herd “wind slowly” and the ploughman merely “plods,” each sound or source of sound slower, less vibrant, than the one before, until three lines later “a solemn stillness holds” as the cattle and ploughman disappear. Consider as well the parallel trajectory of twilight in these same lines, from the “parting of the day” to “darkness.” Together, the audible and the visible combine to mark a liminality not only of thresholds in space and time, but also between the perceptible and

the imperceptible, between presence and absence, each conveying a sense of depletion in the midst of a faintly lingering plentitude — a tenor of loss in juxtaposition with an intangible penetrating power — as the landscape is emptied and the speaker left alone. How we understand this loss and this power, of course, will be shaped by how we understand the bell that began the darkening melancholy process. To recall at this juncture the *historical* Curfew with its connotations of illegitimate political authority could be to consider the force of that permeating power and the nature of that loss in more concrete, even political economic terms. Contrarily, if readers are indeed reluctant to hear the Curfew bell itself, recalling only the passing bell tradition, or perhaps the more aestheticized Curfew of *Il Penseroso*, such overtones of power and loss would readily be assimilated to the familiar poetic and spiritual reflection — to Hervey's *Meditations Among the Tombs* and Young's *Night Thoughts* — on our common mortality and the supernatural designs thought to govern that passage from life to death.

The ramifications, both literary and social, of these alternate readings of melancholic loss are sharpened when we consider more closely the relation of the Curfew to the speaker himself. Significantly, the speaker of the poem appears precisely when sound and light fade into imperceptibility, indeed at the very culmination of that process (a notion reinforced by the placement of “me” as the final word in the stanza and just before a full stop) almost as a kind of residue or remainder or even condensation of that reverberating diminuendo which constitutes and marks the key liminalities of the opening lines: “And leaves the world to darkness and to me.” His status is like that of the beetle's

“droning flight” (7) at the end of the dwindling symphony — a kind of minimal vibration that only intensifies the looming silence and darkness:

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds; (5-8)

This insubstantial interpolation lends to the speaker a spectral air, appropriate to the graveyard and pointing toward the passing bell meditation on the movement from life to death, but the effect tends *also* to conflate the speaker with the culturally distinctive moment of twilight itself, and hence with the Curfew. Christopher Miller has identified evening as the “emblematic time of lyric utterance in the eighteenth century” and verses of that era addressed to evening as declarations of “poetic vocation” (14); thus our ghostly speaker becomes, by convention, the quintessential poet, even perhaps the spirit of poetry itself. Such an interpretation is only strengthened by the long-standing association of Curfew, from *The Tempest* to Warton’s “Ode to Melancholy,” with supernatural summoning; in the case of Warton, and even *Il Penseroso*, with the explicit summoning of poetic inspiration.

Further reinforcing this impression of the speaker as a spirit of poetry is a certain ambiguity in the final line linking the speaker with the subsiding sounds: “And leaves the world to darkness and to me.” In the most obvious reading, the fading sounds would *depart from* the world, and thus also abandon or *bequeath* the world to the darkness and the silence and “to me.” But another, more speculative, reading might suggest that the sounds disappear by traveling *from* the world *to* the darkness and *to* “me,” entering the speaker, perhaps possessing him. However tenuous such a reading, an identical notion is

suggested by the pronominal constitution of the speaker. This is no Wordsworthian “I” as the active agent of perception, memory, and expression, but an objectified “me,” a mere recipient; the speaker never appears as the grammatical subject, only as the objective case or, in the most problematic moment of the text, as (perhaps) second person (93-96). This syntactic equivocation urges the question of whether the speaker inherits the silence or the sound or both. Is he *giving voice* in the silence or is he *given voice* by an infusion of sound? What precisely is the speaker’s relation to the Curfew bell which tolls? Is the speaker, at Curfew time, invoking poetic inspiration or has he himself been invoked by the Curfew? Despite actually speaking the poem, the speaker is less clearly a speaker, an agent in his own right, than something spoken to, if not actually spoken by the Curfew and its symphony. Here, we are remarkably close to the definition of poetic subjectivity offered in Adorno’s “On Lyric and Society”:

Hence the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language acquires a voice. The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject’s expression are one and the same. (43)

Nevertheless, if the speaker is thus to be identified with lyric expressivity generally, his is an unsettled voice. In moving from bell to herd to worker, the opening lines might imply a movement from the voicelessness of inanimate objects, to the expressive but inarticulate voice of animals, to the fully articulate language of humans. In this sequence, the speaker of the poem, as the climax of the series, must represent a kind

of super-human, transcendental voice, perhaps as we have seen the voice of poetry itself. But in another register, the progression actually reverses: the *bell* is fully voiced, with connotations of musical, even artistic expression, while the worker is mute, producing not even the brute animal expressiveness of the herd, but only the voiceless mechanical plod of his footsteps. In this case then, the speaker of the poem, as a climax of the series from voiced to voiceless, would be *less* than voiceless, utterly silent, devoid even of the most inexpressive sounds. Given these contradictory interpolations, this speaker of a poem *about* liminality seems himself to occupy a liminal position, poised somewhere *between* sound and silence, *between* voice and voicelessness. In a similar vein, Christopher Miller reads the “crossed paths of lyric speaker and plowman” in Gray’s opening stanza as “two literary traditions passing in the night” — a pastoral figure of evening as “closure” in tension with a romantic figure of evening as the “departure” and opening of poetic fancy (35). Raymond Williams similarly locates the “Elegy” in a problematic transition from the pastoral “reflection” on rural life to a more historical “retrospection” that re-figures the “ethical contrast” of urban and rural as the irredeemable loss of an earlier age (72-75). Such multi-vocal characterizations help us to understand the complex range of critical responses to the poem as a “tissue of allusions and half-allusions” on the one hand (Brooks 107) and “an anthology of literary clichés available to every minimally educated reader” on the other (Guillory 87): the poem is simultaneously using, reworking, and measuring itself against received but competing literary forms, modes, and traditions. From this perspective, the position between voice and voicelessness of the speaker, the spirit of poetry, marks less an existential than an

artistic problem, a struggle to reconcile one's artistic material, the resources of literary form and tradition, to one's subject.

Such a conclusion would be consistent with the "language of paradox" and affirmation of poetic voice Cleanth Brooks famously reads in "Gray's Well-Storied Urn," where he finds a delicate, ironic sense of balance between extremes, a balance and symmetry that allows him to treat the poem as a dramatic unity rather than "merely a loose collection of poetic passages" (121). For Brooks, as for many other nineteenth and twentieth century readers, the problem posed for the speaker is fundamentally aesthetic and philosophical; the artistic achievement of the poem lies in a balance that minimizes the social and ethical claims of precisely such differences. For him, whether between laborer and poet, or poor and rich, a moral symmetry holds: "Their 'sober wishes [have] never learned' the vanity of straying from it; his, sobered by wisdom, have learned the folly of straying from it" (118). Because the "impulse to hold on to life" is shared by peasant and aristocrat alike, "if one has been treated with pathos, the other with more irony, still neither can be effectual, and both in their anguish of attempt are finally deeply human" (116). In a moment perilously close to his own "heresy of paraphrase," he identifies just such an obviation of class difference as the central purpose of the poem: "The graves are different as we have seen. But both are graves — the fact of death cannot be glossed over — this is the matter on which Gray's irony exerts its force." (114). Such a position, one of the most influential in twentieth century scholarship, would seem to both reflect and reinforce, if only implicitly, the traditional misreading of the Curfew as

passing bell, or at least an emphasis on the ahistorical Curfew typified by *Il Penseroso*.³⁸ In doing so, by glossing over the harsh concrete realities of poverty in the service of philosophical reflection upon an abstract universal death, the disembodied spirit of poetry risks becoming the voice of bourgeois ideology in denial.

For might not a speaker standing between sound and silence suggest less an affirmation of poetic voice than an anxiety over the possibility of poetic failure? Might not liminality and opposition elude subsumption in a single paradoxical voice, leaving us with potsherds, rather than a “well-wrought” urn? If Adorno is correct that “the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism” (45) we should be prepared to discover in the artistic, spiritual struggle for balance in the face of death favored by many readers connections with concrete struggles outside of purely literary history, struggles that stubbornly resist mere aesthetic resolution. Miller, for example, cites the “*Elegy*” as a typical case of how the evening, “emblematic” of “poetic vocation,” also conveys a heightened contrast between “the material labor of the field and the invisible work of poetic thought,” (35) seen in the differing solitudes of the ploughman and the poetic speaker in stanza one: “while other people’s work is ending, the poet’s has just begun” (4). Exploration of this class opposition is sustained throughout the poem in, for example, contrasting the “useful toil” (29) of the peasant with the upper-class Grandeur and Ambition which mocks them, the “uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture” (79) commemorating the commoners with the “long-drawn aisle and fretted

³⁸ In fact, Brooks begins his essay by emphasizing Gray’s enormous debt to Milton in the “*Elegy*,” if not to *Il Penseroso* specifically, and perhaps not surprisingly manages to avoid mentioning the Curfew at all.

vault” (39) of aristocratic burial, the “short and simple annals of the poor” with the “boast of heraldry, the pomp of power” (32-33). A sounding of the historical Curfew at the beginning of the poem, in so far as it invites us to reflect on the political and economic, rather than merely spiritual, forces in public life might also require us to take these sharply insistent class comparisons more seriously, finding them less tractable to either poetic synthesis or paradox. Signaled by *that* bell, and all its long associations with tyranny, Gray’s unfolding concerns appear more consistent with those of Max Horkheimer in my opening epigraph: the universality of death seems less the focus or argument of the poem than an occasion for reflecting on how unjustly particular the paths towards death can be for rich and poor. Now, no longer merely an aesthete “man of sensibility,” *this* speaker of the poem would appear to face an artistic challenge only in so far as he struggles to articulate in poetry the cultural and political problem of class; the internal tension between voice and voicelessness would echo an external opposition between *the voiced* and *the voiceless* in the English class system. And finally, the problematic, liminal position of the speaker himself with regards to voice and voicelessness would be understood as a problematic position within these political economic relations that define and constitute him as well.

Here, my previous question regarding the ontological ambiguity of the speaker (“Is he *giving voice* in the silence or is he *given voice* by an infusion of sound?”) takes on a new urgency: is the speaker giving voice to a relatively autonomous reflection on this political economic system in the silence of a subsiding ideology? Or is he given voice by that system, with silence the sign of an ideology completely absorbed, leaving nothing

else to be said? Does he speak over and against the historical Curfew or does that historical tradition speak him? If such a speaker calls for, even stands for, the spirit of poetry, he takes on now a similar aura but of broader national historical import, perhaps even a spirit of the times. As early as 1781, Samuel Johnson seems to claim just such a special status for the “Elegy” in relation to the culture at large:

The Churchyard abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind
and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo... he that reads
them here persuades himself that he has always felt them. (Vol 4 485)

Indeed, the poem “seems almost from the moment of its first appearance to have become an inextricable part of the very language itself,” according to biographer Robert Mack (23). Nearly a century and a half after the “Elegy” was published, it would be nominated as “the typical piece of English verse, our poem of poems” (Gosse 97). Certainly the reputation of the poem, which is “easily to be counted among the most popular and widely memorized poems of all time,” could support such an appellation: “The roughest of counts shows over fifty separate editions of the Elegy in the first half century following its initial publication in February, 1751, not to mention scores of unauthorized appearances in newspapers, magazines, and other journals” (Mack 23). In the words of John Guillory: “The poem Johnson describes seems to be uttered by the *Zeitgeist*, as though it were the consummate expression of a social consensus” (91). At the same time, Guillory notes that Johnson’s formulation excludes from “every mind” and “every bosom” both the illiterate and the culturally unsophisticated. Of course, this same distinction between the educated elite and the illiterate masses haunts the poem itself. If

the “*Elegy*” is indeed England’s “poem of poems” the reason must surely lie partly in how the work re-articulates the sentiments, traditions, and experiences of the national culture, now understood to include the structures of privilege and class.

At last then, we have come to the basis for a hypothesis as to why hearing the Curfew of the “*Elegy*” should prove so problematic for so many readers. If bells, as we have seen, represent the voice of the English nation, and the “*Elegy*” that nation’s “poem of poems,” then surely Gray’s Curfew must hang in the very heart of English cultural identity, and came there by all accounts with extraordinary speed after 1751. To hear that Curfew and to read that poem as questioning the national system of power and class could be perceived as a threat to the entire cultural ideological apparatus sustaining such inequality and privilege, a system benefiting precisely those most likely to read and understand the poem, at least until the expansion of literary education beyond the middling classes. To locate that very challenge already ensconced within such an enormously popular national icon would seem likely to raise substantial resistance, making it difficult if not impossible to hear the Curfew at all, and certainly not to hear those strains which echo what some would call the founding tyranny of English aristocracy under William the Conqueror. On the other hand, to hear only the familiar and officially sanctioned passing bell could serve not only to deflect such historical associations from the poem, but also to transpose any lingering class critique into laudable, didactic reflections on the shared human sorrows that transcend class, grounded in the spiritual ideology and religio-political institutions of class power. Whether or not the “*Elegy*” actually contains the resources to read a sustained critique of class is beyond

the scope of this essay, but that question need not necessarily affect historical perceptions and cultural anxieties about what such an influential text *might* inspire. If my hypothesis is correct, however, we would expect to find historical evidence that, first, the “Elegy” was understood to contain a potential political economic critique; second, that the Curfew was identified as a potent symbol of that critique; and finally, that because of this the “Elegy” was sensed to be concerning in some way, if not actually dangerous.

There can be no doubt that, if the most scholarly readers of the “Elegy” seemed not to find there any political force to call forth with the tyrannical Curfew, other readers certainly did. In less than twenty years after the “Elegy” appears, two widely circulated poems of socio-economic critique used the elegiac stanza popularized, if not invented by Gray, as well as readily recognized images and diction from the famous poem to great political effect. The first, attributed to one Simon Hedge, a “Kentish labourer,” addresses a “Poor Man's Prayer: An Elegy” (1766) to the Earl of Chatham against the economic consequences of unregulated trade, enclosure, and cultivation for export:

Ah, no; yon hill, where daily sweats my brow,
A thousand flocks, a thousand herds adorn;
Yon field, where late I drove the painful plough,
Feels all her acres crown'd with wavy corn.

But what avails, that o'er the furrow'd soil
In autumn's heat the yellow harvests rise,
If artificial want elude my toil,
Untasted plenty wound my craving eyes? (61-8)

To communicate the painful consequences of these policies the poem draws upon the images of domestic bliss and healthful productive labor located by Gray in the past lives of the village forefathers — the children at play and the blazing hearth — then, much as

the “Elegy” does suggest that the darkening present no longer contains such happy times:

But ah! how chang'd the scene! on the cold stones,
Where wont at night to blaze the chearful fire,
Pale famine sits, and counts her naked bones,
Still sighs for food, still pines with vain desire. (33-6)

The second political poem modeled after the “Elegy,” published anonymously, but written by Thomas Moss, entitled “The Beggar” (1769) recounts the story of a peasant farmer evicted from home — “oppression forced me from my cot” (31) — who loses his wife and daughter to starvation and despair, summing up his story with an explicit reworking of a famous line from the “Elegy”: “And left the world to wretchedness and me” (40). Another somewhat later example, the anonymous “Elegy Occasioned by the Present Frequent and Pernicious Custom of Monopolizing Farms” (1796), draws less overtly upon the “Elegy” but nevertheless relies upon it as a model of elegiac structure and borrows some of its distinctive language.

In each of these cases, the poets seem to recognize in the tenor of loss and darkness cast over the village setting at Curfew by the “Elegy” an appropriate model for very real political-economic depredations of rural life at mid-century. Suvir Kaul has, without invoking the Curfew, found in that opening stanza a “catalogue of loss” which rewrites as darkly oppressive the mercantilist celebration of that century’s conventional “prospect” poem: “The landscape, instead of being populated by the signs of plenty and prosperity, is emptied, depopulated” (129). I would add that this stark impression of depopulation provoked by the stanza recalls one of the central points at issue in the eighteenth century enclosure debates: whether the forced displacement of commoners and

enclosure of their fields damaged or promoted rural economies by eliminating inefficient workers. A similar allusion to enclosure might be found in the cattle of the scene, for this is no household milk cow or smallholder's brace, but a herd large enough to "wind" in line over the pastures and thus most reasonably an example of relatively large-scale production for the market rather than of peasant subsistence farming. Likewise, Gray's depiction of the plodding ploughman reverses the usual pastoral cliché of collective labor and "jocund" workers, images relegated in the "Elegy" to the past of the village forefathers,

and the silence and the solitude of the ploughman can thus easily be read as signs and consequences of alienation from political power and from communal relations of production in an atomized wage labor economy after enclosure. In fact, in *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. T. Warton* (1785) challenging the poet's claim that Gray misrepresented the work day of ploughmen, the author not only testifies to such late evening work hours, but also specifically relates the image to the "inclosed Counties" (Darby 10). Similarly, an anonymous pamphlet (1780) enquiring into the social and economic impact of enclosure upon the poor finds in the "Elegy" ploughman the very image of post-enclosure suffering, arguing that once proper laws of remediation are passed "The cottager would at his return from his daily work for his daily wages, no longer 'homeward plod his weary way.' But his heart leaping with joy at the thoughts of his cottage" (67). Seven years later, John Howlett, arguing against the notion of enclosure as detrimental to rural life, found it necessary to turn the "Elegy" back against the anti-enclosure pamphleteers, claiming that Gray's happy domestic scene was more likely to be found after enclosure than before:

“No more let us hear of *happy commoners* and the wondrous *rights of commonage*” (78-9). The “Elegy” then not only prompted reflection on contemporary political economic inequities, but the text itself actually became a tool and even a site of contestation in discourse around those topics.

During this same period, the Curfew traditions as well became an important site of cultural political contestation. In his seminal study of the so-called “Norman Yoke theory,” Christopher Hill (50-122) traces the centuries-long use of the Norman Conquest as a kind of political mythology by which reformers and reactionaries alike attempted to mobilize sentiment around belief in a pre-Norman, Saxon golden age of liberty. Though the discourse is extraordinarily complex, for conservatives generally the narrative emphasizes a heroic continuity between ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties and contemporary freedoms thanks to the spirited defense of common law; for reformers and radicals, the Conquest symbolizes an illegitimate imposition of authority over the English freeman, serving to justify various degrees of attack on contemporary institutions as derived from that original tyrannical act.³⁹ According to Hill, in particular the “second half of the eighteenth century saw revivals of radical versions of the Norman Yoke theory” arising hand in hand with reformist and revolutionary movements in America and France as well as with indigenous British movements of the period. As perhaps the key symbol of “Norman tyranny,” the historical Curfew tradition regularly became a focal point of such movements in their efforts to delegitimize governments they opposed. In some cases,

³⁹ Chibnall covers much the same territory in broader strokes, but with an eye towards the nature and development of historical scholarship, rather than the political uses of the Norman Yoke tradition. On the continuing power of this political mythology, especially in the popular consciousness, see Barber, Brownlie, and Nunning.

literal Curfews were invoked and denounced, as when Lord Moira debated the Earl of Clare in Parliament over English oppression in Ireland: a central complaint was the imposition of an evening Curfew; at stake was whether such an act amounted to a symbolic re-enactment of the Norman Yoke or merely constituted a practical measure against extremism.⁴⁰ More commonly, the Curfew would be invoked only symbolically. Radical William Cobbett in the early nineteenth century was found of labeling his opponents as “Knights of the Curfew” and regularly accused them of trying to return to that tyrannical age, as when suggesting that George Canning, then Tory head of the House of Commons, “would send us back to the days of the Curfew” (139).

As the Curfew tradition itself becomes more widely politicized so too do political uses of the “Elegy” Curfew arise. One anonymous correspondent, dubbed “Political Economist,” expressly cites the “Elegy” Curfew and links it to the Norman Yoke in complaining about the system of state financing, describing it as a “political curfew” that “tends as much to ‘toll the knell of parting’ national vigour, as the curfew of the Norman William did that of the ‘parting day’” (302). Another correspondent concerned with an agricultural economy so weak that tenant farmers would be unable to survive even if no rent were demanded also explicitly invokes the “Elegy” Curfew: “To the tenant, to the landlord, and to the community at large, this is a solemn and an awful truth, which will, like the curfew, ‘toll the knell of their departing day,’ unless it prove the signal of just alarm, and the means of timely prevention” (Moggridge 299). In line with this tendency at least on the part of some politicized readers to link the Norman

⁴⁰ These debates were widely recorded and re-distributed. See, for example, Clare (1798), *The New Annual Register* (1799), or *The Parliamentary History of England* (1818).

Curfew with the “Elegy” bell, the “Elegy” itself was also occasionally light-heartedly written back into the history of the Norman Conquest: When Maria Elizabeth Budden publishes a children’s Modern History after retelling the tale of how William established the Curfew, she ends with a simple but telling prompt: “you remember the line of Gray” (58). Similarly, Thomas Dibdin in *A Metrical History of England* begins the stanzas dedicated to William the Conqueror (135-43) with a brief nod to the “Elegy” — “The Curfew tolls the knell of Danish sway” — then continues the poem in Gray’s meter and rhyme scheme. On a more serious note, Thomas Stephen in *The Book of the Constitution of Great Britain* would promote the Norman Yoke model of English history not only by retelling the legend of the Curfew imposition but also by quoting Gray’s “knell of parting day” to describe this “melancholy curfew” (246).

The most famous, and most radical, example of this politicized Curfew and the Norman Yoke of the eighteenth century would no doubt be Thomas Paine’s revolutionary dictum in *The Rights of Man*: “Though not a courtier will talk of the curfew-bell, not a village in England has forgotten it” (24). According to Hill, “Paine’s aim was to bring hereditary monarchy, the peerage, and indeed the whole constitution, into contempt; and here memories of Norman oppression were useful” (101). More interestingly, his suggestion that the Curfew tradition would be remembered differently, if at all, according to class interest reinforces my notion that the Curfew of the “Elegy” might be subject to different interpretations, even outright erasures, depending upon the degree of politicization sought or avoided by readers of that poem. In responding to Paine’s unsettling politics, many of his opponents focused precisely on this divisive use of the

Curfew. John Bowles insisted that Paine's invocation was anachronistic, that the Curfew bell stood now only as a symbol of a tyranny long past that "serves by way of contrast to attach us the more firmly to the system of security we now enjoy against the repetition of such grievous oppressions" (12-3). Other critics seized upon the literal sense of Curfew as "fire control" to create a political counter-metaphor, attempting to turn the sense against Paine's representation. John Stewart, for example, scatters his *Tocsin of Britannia* with references to revolutionary rhetoric as "inflammatory" or "inflammation" (6-7) and other fiery diction, insisting that although the French revolutionaries "cease not to throw around their inflammatory embers in this Island; these, however, falling upon the non-combustive matter of a thoughtful people, have no effect" (3). By the end of the pamphlet, his final tocsin, or alarm bell, becomes a literal "curfew" not as a symbol of tyranny but as a call to arms: "One clangorous peal more and then let the curfew cease: I call upon Government to arm men of property, to arm them instantaneously" (46) against the forces of revolution he has repeatedly referred to in terms of fire out of control. In his *Second Peal of the Tocsin* that same year, the rhetoric of flames becomes nearly obsessive:

O, Democrats! perfidious knaves ! or incorrigible fools! arresting the hand of public energy with the cry of reform; none but madmen in the conflagration of the city would be occupied in placing before their houses the scaffold of repair, or during the incendiary of the ground floor, would be arranging the furniture of the attic story. (1-2)

However extreme such a fiery image may appear, in a recent study of the political imagination in late eighteenth-century Britain, John Barrell finds much the same political rhetoric of fire across numerous sources:

The revolutionary imagination is variously described as 'inflated', 'hot', 'heated', 'jaundiced', 'unbounded', 'perverted', 'deranged', and 'evil', and the writers of Paine and his followers are calculated to 'flatter' the 'imagination of the mob', to 'enflame the minds and heat the imaginations of that class of men who are ever liable to the seductions of the wonderful and marvellous'. (22)

This symbology of fire, provoked no doubt in part by Paine's use of the Curfew, tended in turn to reinforce further political uses of that bell. For Barrell, however, this language is merely one example of a larger politicized imagination. His study calls attention not just to the use of specific imaginative rhetoric but more importantly to the role of "political imagination" as a concept figuring and refiguring the possibilities for social change and resistance, alerting us to the powerful role of emerging philosophical and psychological *theories* of imagination as reference points for actualizing and demarcating the limits of reasonable and unreasonable modes of political discourse. Grounded in "the principle of suggestion in spontaneous trains of thought" (Brown 252), the imagination for late eighteenth-century thinkers primarily occurred "when our attention is not fixed on any one thing, a state of mind called a reverie, we may observe, that our thoughts are continually changing, so that in a little time our imagination wanders to something very different from that which we were thinking of just before" (Beattie 1790 106-7). At the

same time, these trains of thought might easily continue unchecked beyond the point of a “reasonable” spontaneity: “Late eighteenth-century theories of the imagination as an associative, a creative, a synthesizing, as a completing power, always observed a limit point, where aesthetics was anxious to pass the concept over to psychiatry; for when the imagination slipped the lead of the will or judgement, often when 'heated' by the overwhelming power of the passions, it became 'disordered'” (Barrell 6). It is in these terms that concepts of imagination became touchstones of caution and critique in responding to political rhetoric and philosophy on both sides of the spectrum. And, curiously it is in these terms as well that the Curfew and the “Elegy” are found once again in the center of eighteenth-century political culture.

When philosopher Dugald Stewart attempts in 1792 to explain the relationship between imagination and the fine arts, especially poetry, he turns to the work of Thomas Gray for help (I 358-62). Stewart understood Gray to have captured the essence of that associative power: “Mr. Gray, who appears, from various passages in his works, to have studied the phenomena of the Human Mind much more attentively and successfully than most poets” (III 209). When Archibald Alison explores, in his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, the nature of the sublime, especially with regard to sounds, and the power of the poetic imagination he turns also to Gray, drawing upon the Curfew for an extended example over half a dozen separate times across 187 pages and placing the “Elegy” and the Curfew as the centerpiece of an argument defining the nature of imagination as a series of culturally determined associations. Sometime later, a philosophical contributor to the *Knickerbocker* magazine explaining this same “principle

of association” in an essay on “Descriptive Poetry” (1944) would again turn to a “beautiful illustration of this found in the opening stanzas of Gray’s *Elegy*” (7). The author pictures the “melancholy spirit” of Gray at the moment of poetic composition:

His imagination darting hither and thither, and governed in its flight by laws too subtle and delicate to be analyzed, reposed itself for a moment amidst the gloom of the historical associations that cluster around the curfew, hovered over the lowing herd, and followed the ploughman as he homeward plods his weary way. (8)

Another anonymous literary correspondent (“The Philosophy of Poetry”), following Allison in defining the imagination or “fancy” as “a train of images and associations” uses the opening line of the “*Elegy*” to “exemplify” this imaginative flow: “his fancy first flies away to the origin of the evening bell, and, as we may imagine, rapidly wanders amid the associations of antiquity and romance, which link themselves to the name of the *curfew*” before the musing poet “invests, for the moment,” that sound with the associations of the “death knell” (834-35). Here, remarkably, in both authors we find a depiction of precisely the culturally overdetermined process of reading the opening line I have been hypothesizing: a movement first towards the “gloom” of historical associations with the curfew, then away, and in the case of the second author actually towards the passing bell instead.

This then is the possibility and the peril of the “*Elegy*”: thought to embody the imagination both by virtue of its imagistic flow and its explicit emphasis on reverie or meditation as a thematic subject; radiating within that liminal space of poetic meditation

from the sounding of a Curfew, itself an object deeply imbued with political associations apt, as in the epigraph of this chapter, to draw us deeper still into reverie; spoken by a prophetic voice identified with the spirit both of poetry and the national identity; identified as an object of theoretical speculation as to the nature of imagination; the poem becomes a socially acknowledged, powerfully generative, source of cultural-political imaginative power for its readers, a power that in revolutionary times or times of great socio-economic disruption could appear either liberating or threatening, a power that readers would learn to guard against and seek to control — for, as yet another anonymous correspondent (“Our Pocket Companions”) has remarked about the poem: “we see no reason why a churchyard, however rural or simple, being a place of graves, might not suggest any idea whatever, let its wildness, depth, or vastness be what it may” (137).

CONCLUSION: HEARING THE CURFEW AGAIN

John Guillory, in his now famous analysis of how and why the “Elegy” came to occupy such a central place in the English canon (85-133), finds in the poem an essentially conservative cultural apparatus for reflecting on, facilitating, and justifying shifts in cultural capital resulting eventually in a newly confident middle class readership assured of its position, if not among the upper tiers of capitalist society, then at least of its status over and against the poor. While acknowledging that such has been the ideological *use* of the poem as institutionalized, I have not been persuaded that either the impetus or the rationalization for such readings lie within the text itself. I am drawn instead to a rather more nuanced reading by Catherine Robson (123-190) building on Guillory, but finding in both the poem and in Gray himself a greater ambivalence toward the class hierarchy than previously supposed, as well as inklings of a more sustained class critique, when she considers the meanings more readily available once it has been “read and recited by the poor themselves, the very people it dubs both unlettered and mute” (132). Such an approach directs us to re-consider both how the poem has been read historically and how it has *not*, to reconsider what resources might lie within the poem for a critique of the class system rather than merely accommodation to it, and why such resources have not been made readily available. In this sense, I see my project as in collaboration with Guillory and Robson, in helping to identify alternative, non-canonical readings of the “Elegy” as well as outlining some of the literary historical processes by which those readings were repressed or excluded from the mainstream cultural practices documented by them.

I have argued that, taken together, the extensive historical and literary associations surrounding the Curfew, in conjunction with the massive cultural effort to displace these associations from England's "poem of poems" and in doing so displace them from the heart of any literary cultural engagement with growing class conflict during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries virtually demands that we take seriously, at face value, the prominent role of the Curfew rather than the passing bell in the literal text of the poem and consider how our understanding of the "Elegy" would change if we accept the poet's invitation to situate his famous bell — on its own terms as an "idiom, not only of words and phrases, but of customs and manners" — firmly within the historical context of mid-eighteenth century British cultural practices and beliefs. Of course, no such invocation of the cultural traditions specific to Curfew can outright deny the familiar airs of a passing bell in the diction and imagery of the opening line; nevertheless, to read the former *merely* as the latter is not only to amplify certain figurative undertones — however compelling or sanctioned by scholarly precedent — at the expense of the literal text, but also to be tone deaf to the Curfew striking its own "inescapable" symbolic notes in history and in literature, notes that play as much against the "mastery" of death in the poem as with it.

In this way, I suggest reversing the usual critical tendency of treating the Curfew *per se* as purely rhetorical, simply a pastoral backdrop and plausible pretext for introducing a passing bell association into the evening churchyard; rather, while any poem ending in epitaph and an imagined grave for the speaker must in some sense take death as a theme, I would work against the temptation to read the poem too quickly or too

forcefully as “about” our common mortality, looking instead to the Curfew for predominate subjects and themes — themes of covering fires, of social commands, of political and economic division. Such an approach has the advantage, as we have seen, not only of engaging with the critical intuitions of many eighteenth-century readers about the bell, not to mention acknowledging the personal and aesthetic implications of the Curfew traditions for Gray himself, but also of unifying within a common symbolic framework some of the most important lines of the poem. Images such as the once “blazing hearth” of the peasant household, the peasant hearts once “pregnant with celestial fire” but denied a chance to kindle at the “Muse’s flame,” and perhaps the most puzzling assertion of all that “in our ashes live their wonted fires,” all speak *directly* to the Curfew traditions of regulating fire. If the Curfew associations are expanded to include less overt images of “fire” control — to “quench the blushes” of aristocratic shame, to “repress” or “damp” (Eton ms.) the “noble rage” — together with a more general sense of “covering” and “controlling,” then another half dozen lines or so are accounted for by this reading. Moreover, once we have accepted the plausibility of reading the Curfew historically rather than only rhetorically, other objects and images in the poem may well find their historical contexts as well. The result could be a view of the “Elegy” as engaging textually with a more radical, though inchoate, critique of capitalist class relations than commonly supposed, and a view of the graveyard with its melancholy circumstances as marking not the subject per se of the poem, but the poetic *occasion* for a more general speculation on loss, loss conditioned as much by historical, even political economic forces as by the transitory nature of human existence in general.

APPENDIX: TEXT OF THE POEM

Explanatory Note: For the text below, I generally follow Lonsdale (1969) and his reliance on the Dodsley edition of 1753 printed from proofs corrected by Gray himself. We differ, however, in our use of capitalization. Lonsdale follows what he describes as the “convention prevailing after 1750” of “accepting occasional capitalization as a useful emphatic device, particularly in drawing the reader’s attention to personification” (xiv). In doing so, he reports that the supposed “presence of a personifying tendency has been the test . . . normally applied in cases where the retention of a capital was in doubt.” As a result, many words actually capitalized by Gray, including the Curfew, are *not* capitalized by Lonsdale for not conforming to his expectations of meaningful personification. In contrast, as I argue above (18-21), at least some of the capitalizations employed by Gray would seem to reflect significant cultural and literary associations. Therefore, rather than impose an *a priori* editorial judgment as to the thematic import of some capitals versus others, I have restored to Lonsdale’s text the capitalizations as they originally appeared in the authoritative Dodsley edition of 1753, and were retained in 1768. After the text, I have included a complete list of the sixteen words restored to capitalization, along with one word spuriously capitalized by Lonsdale that did not appear as such in Dodsley.

Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard

By Thomas Gray

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight, 5
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain 10
Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, 15
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. 20

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, 25
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure; 30
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour. 35
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to These the fault,
If Memory o'er their Tomb no Trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. 40

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll; 50
Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, 55
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little Tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood. 60

The applause of listening senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their history in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone 65
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame, 70
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life 75
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet even these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh. 80

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey, 85
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires; 90
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured Dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led, 95
Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,
'Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
'Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn. 100

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
'That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
'His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn, 105
'Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
'Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

'One morn I missed him on the custom'd hill,
'Along the heath and near his favourite tree; 110
'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

'The next with dirges due in sad array
'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay, 115
'Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

The Epitaph

*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own. 120*

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.*

*No farther seek his merits to disclose, 125
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.*

Variation from Lonsdale as corrected to conform with Gray (1753)

Line 1	Curfew	Line 91	Nature
Line 16	Forefathers	Line 92	Ashes, Fires
Line 17	Morn	Line 95	contemplation, capitalization removed
Line 37	These	Line 96	Spirit
Line 38	Tomb, Trophies	Line 97	Swain
Line 58	Tyrant	Line 117	Earth
Line 93	Dead	Line 118	Fortune, Fame

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